

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

15¢
MAR.



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES
FEATURE NOVEL

• **CURSE OF THE
LOBO CUB**

by **THOMAS THOMPSON**
TWO NOVELETTES

• **KILL THAT BUCKSKIN
BREED!**

by **FRANK
P. CASTLE**

• **GUNSLICK
FOR A DAY**

by **MARVIN
DeVRIES**

- **ROAN • TRIMNELL**
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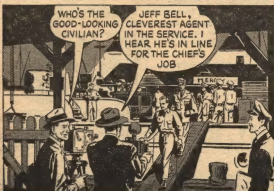


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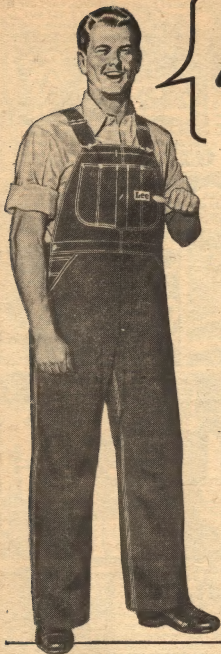
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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Armed only with ambition, long-gun
and Bible, adventurer Jed Smith
blazed a . . .

PHANTOM TRAIL

By
L. THOMAS BRISTER

JEDEDIAH STRONG SMITH had one great desire in life—to find and develop a practical overland route between California and Oregon. And, in the thirty-three years allotted him on earth, he did find this route—aided by his long-gun and his Bible.

He tried twice before he succeeded.

Born in 1798 in Brainbridge, New York, young Jed Smith went West early, landing in St. Louis as a rawboned, overgrown boy. General William Henry Ashley wanted trappers to push into the wilderness recently opened by the Lewis and Clark expedition.

"You are young for such work," General Ashley said, looking at the youth standing in front of his desk. He went on to tell about Indian trouble, how he had lost trappers to Sioux and Cheyenne and Arapaho war-parties. "You understand, Mr. Smith, the danger you will go into?"

"Thoroughly, sir."

The general sighed. "Then the job is yours. You leave tomorrow on the packet *Missouri Queen* for the Montana territory."

"I would rather go into the southern Rockies, sir, if it is all right with you."

"The southern Rockies? And might I ask why?"

Young Jed Smith had a Bible in his coat-pocket. His fingers found it and steadied around it.

"Someday I hope to get to California, sir."

General Ashley walked to the big map on the wall. "California, the land of the Spaniards. Americans are not wanted there, sir. Might I ask another question? What draws you to California?"

(Please continue on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

"From California, I hope to scout and find a trail leading into Oregon. I have read quite a bit about California, sir, and also I have read about Oregon. California has many products that could find a sale in Oregon. Both territories will grow quickly, I believe, once Indian troubles are put down."

"You are somewhat of a business man, then?"

"I hope to be, sir."

General Ashley was silent for a moment. He was middle-aged now, and for a moment a wistful look touched his face.

"God go with you, Mr. Smith," he said.

YOUNG Jed Smith went into the wilderness with his long-gun, his Bible, and a few traps. He never became Old Jed Smith. Jim Bridger became Old Jim, Kit Carson became Old Kit, but Jed Smith never became Old Jed. A Comanche bullet saw to that.

For almost ten years, he trapped in the Rocky Mountain region. He sat out raging blizzards—blizzards that blew snow across his traps and froze them down—and during those times he read his Bible. He was always reading. He read every printed word upon which he could get his hands.

He read all he could find on California. He questioned men like Jim Bridger and James Pattie—men who had pushed beyond the western slopes of the Rockies—men who knew about Great Salt Lake and the deserts beyond.

"That thar Californy country ain't nothin' but hostile to a foreigner," Jim Bridger related. "Them done bin in that for years now an' they've done fit off the Russians, an' they aim to hol' that country."

By that time, Jedediah Smith had become a full-fledged wilderness man. He had been jumped by a grizzly bear and they had fought it out. Jed Smith had won, but he carried to his end the marks of the grizzly's fangs.

"Reckon I'll head over Californy way some time. They's a fortune waitin' there for the right man."

"Doin' what, Jed?"

Jed Smith had squatted and drawn a rough map in the dust. They were at the

Green River Rendezvous, and trappers were drinking and bartering with buyers.

"The way it looks to me, Jim, it looks like all of Californy ain't bein' used right. From what I hear they's lots of farmin' lan' bein' held off the market by them Spaniards an' Mexicans. A man can open up that trade, get routes runnin' north, an' he kin haul produce up into Oregon Territory. That country's goin' boom with farmers an' cowmen."

"They ship by sea, Jed."

"Yeah, but Californy ain't developed yet. Takes Americans to develop it. I aim to get in on the ground floor."

"Them Spaniards won't like it."

Jed Smith rubbed the fresh scar below his left ear. "Mebbe they've got to like it," he said slowly.

That spring, with fifteen men, Jed Smith pulled out of Great Salt Lake, heading for California.

With him he brought his rifle and his Bible.

He crossed the desert and the Colorado River, and they put him in jail in San Diego. The Spaniards didn't want *gringos*. They had an empire—a lazy empire—and they didn't want it broken by a man who carried a deadly rifle, yet read the Bible.

At that time, San Diego was the shipping port of the California coast. Yankee ships, anchored in the harbor, heard about their fellow countryman who was in the San Diego jail. Personally they didn't know this man Jedediah Strong Smith. But he was a citizen of the United States.

By political pull, they got him out of jail.

"Young fella," a grizzled old salt said, in way of advice, "you kinda overstepped, huh? Git back in the Rockies an' keep on trappin'. These Spaniards got this country tied up tight, an' next time they might not be so friendly-like—they might do somethin' serious to you."

"You will leave?" the judge asked.

Jed Smith had smiled, said, "I'll leave, señor."

He had found what he wanted—or, rather, he had found part of what he was looking for. He had found oranges and groves and a rich land held back by too much private ownership. The peon never

(Please continue on page 95)

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CURSE

Young Tony York learned he could never escape from gunslick Burr Ridkey unless he could win the death struggle of a wolf cub turning on the leader of the pack.



CHAPTER

Doomed by the Past

1

In a willow thicket at the edge of a stream four men hunkered around a small fire and the dampness of last night's rain was still in their clothes. They were men who had killed for pay and helped

to rearrange the ownership of a valley. At a few scattered ranches they could still sit at well-loaded tables and be honored as heroes; at others they would find a rope waiting for them on the cross-bar of the

OF THE LOBO CUB

By

THOMAS THOMPSON

*Gun-Scorched Novel of
Rangeland Revenge*



He kept trying to lift those
guns.

gate. Once men had bid for their services; now those same men offered a price for their scalps. There was no great concern in Tony York, the youngest of the four, as he thought about it. He was a man who thought of one thing at a time. He spoke to Burr Ridkey, the leader, "Don't try to stop me, Burr."

The faint tension lines of an hour argument were on Burr Ridkey's face. He gave the appearance of having a great

deal of patience, but Burr Ridkey's appearance was deceiving. He was not a powerfully built man; he had a friendly look on his thin face; he could smile while he murdered. When he was out of the saddle he moved with a slow, almost shuffling gait, but there wasn't a horse along the river that Ridkey couldn't ride. While the pay held out he had liked his role of helping the little ranchers against the big ones; he fancied himself a sort of Robin Hood. Yet it was common knowledge that he had sold his own brother's

life for a hundred dollars when he needed money. If he had any respect for any man it was probably for Tony York. Ridkey looked at the younger man and shook his head. "I said no, Tony."

Tony York smiled. He was tall and lean, his skin the shade of an old saddle, his eyes an almost colorless grey. He had joined this band when he was fourteen, leaving a dead father and a burned cabin behind him. He had been ruthless in what he felt had to be done and in six years he had grown to be a man. He took tobacco from his pocket now and rolled himself a cigarette. Still smiling he said, "You taught me all I ever knew, Burr. You said once if we ever tangled it would be a hell of a mess. Is this going to be it?"

Across from them, Scotty and Zukor Dean got to their feet. Scotty was a small, bowlegged man with a knife scar that ran from his left temple to the tip of his chin. He wore two guns and he carried a knife in his boot. Zukor Dean was tall and thin, a pensive and moody man who could see in the dark. Scotty said, "What the hell, Tony? We've saved their cows for 'em a dozen times. Ain't it only fair we help ourselves to a few now?"

"I'm not thinking about that part of it," Tony York said truthfully. "You can steal every cow in the valley and drive 'em off to Kansas, for all I care. I'm just through, that's all." He was still smiling, he was still busy with the cigarette, but his eyes never left Burr Ridkey's face and there was tenseness in the line of his jaw.

"I figured four of us for this move, Tony," Burr Ridkey said. "I won't hold still for you messin' up my plans."

"You'll have to," Tony said. "I'm heading north. I saw a little valley when I was up there. I bought it from a fellow cheap."

"When a man sells cheap," Burr Ridkey said, "there's something wrong with his deal."

"What's wrong with this," Tony said, "I can take care of it. I told you it was fine it was here a few years back."

"Then why don't we all go?" Scotty said.

"Because I didn't invite you," Tony York said. He stood up and now the unlighted cigarette was in the corner of his mouth. This had been building up to a showdown for an hour and now it was

ready. He saw the sudden bleakness in Ridkey's eyes, then the movement of his hand—

Tony had the advantage because he was on his feet. It was completely effortless, the way his right hand dropped. The gun seemed to jump from the holster to slap against his palm, but even at that it was only a split second faster than Burr Ridkey's draw. The two men stood there, not six feet apart. "You told me once," Tony said, "never to draw a gun unless I planned on using it."

That hard, fixed smile was on Burr Ridkey's face. "It was good advice, Tony. 'You'll never have a better chance.'"

Tony did not put his gun back into its holster; neither did he cock it. "I'm leaving, Burr," he said. "That's all." He knew what it would have been like if Ridkey had beaten him to the draw, but he couldn't bring himself to squeeze the trigger. He backed into the thicket, the gun still in his hand, and he caught his horse. The sorrel was ready, and there was a blanket roll behind the saddle. Tony mounted and he leaned forward and looked at the men with whom he had ridden so long. "Forget you knew me, boys," he advised. "I'll do the same for you."

Burr Ridkey looked up and the sun was full on his face. There was a hard glint in his eyes, a smile on his lips. "No man walks out on me, Tony," he said softly. "If you do make it, I reckon our trails will cross up north someplace."

"It'll be best if they don't," Tony said. He spurred his horse and the animal lunged straight at the men, knocking the coffee pot flying, scattering the camp equipment. Scotty jumped out of the way; Zukor Dean stumbled and fell and Tony's horse leaped over him. Burr Ridkey dropped to his knees, jerked his gun and fired. The bullet seared close to Tony's cheek.

Tony stretched his body low along the horse's neck and spurred wickedly, crashing the animal through the screen of brush. Ridkey's gun cracked again and Tony felt the bullet cut through the flesh of his thigh. That was like Ridkey. Give him a break and you were a sucker. Tony spurred blood from the horse and he was into the thicket and out of range. He realized then that he hadn't fired a single

shot at Burr Ridkey. He had let sentiment get in his way. And that had been a mistake, he knew. It was one of the first rules Burr Ridkey had ever taught him—never give a sucker a break.

He rode straight north until he came to a small town. The wound in his leg was slight, but it bled a lot and the flesh was beginning to swell. However, he had escaped from Ridkey at last.

HE RODE slowly after that. In time the wound healed over. He threw away the bloody trousers and bathed in a creek and it was as if he had shed part of his past. He began to wonder about the thing that had made him decide to leave.

He hadn't tried to explain to Burr and the others why he was leaving, because he couldn't even explain it to himself. It had started when he awakened one night near midnight and the rain was falling into his face. He had stared into the night and felt the wet earth against his back and he realized that it had been six years since he had had a permanent roof over his head. After that he noticed things that had never bothered him before.

In the years he had been with Ridkey he had killed a man who needed killing and he had helped wreck a cattle empire that needed wrecking. But there that night with the rain in his face he had become aware of the fact that revenge alone is not a permanent motivation for living.

He had gone north after that on a special job for Ridkey, and he had found this valley where he was heading now. There was trouble there—the old story all over again. But the fact that trouble was there neither encouraged Tony nor made him hesitate. He didn't need to have a part in it. The ranch was a good buy. It could be made into something better than it was, and a man could live his own life. He closed the deal and came back south. He owed Ridkey the courtesy of telling him he was quitting. As far as Tony York was concerned he had paid that debt and now he owed nothing to any man.

He refused to admit that the girl he had met up here had anything to do with it, but as he came closer to the mountain country his night stops were shorter and his day trips longer. He kept thinking of Jim Martell, the girl's father, a man who

had the deadly calm of a killer and spoke with the voice of a preacher. He lost his appetite and there was a growing impatience in him.

It was late one afternoon when he rode into the town at the foot of the mountains. He saw the horses in front of the saloon and he knew there were too many riders here. Old habit made him loosen his gunbelt before going in through the swinging doors. The broken chatter of a mass argument stopped abruptly and a dozen pair of eyes turned to look at him.

He had met these men casually when he was here before. They were the small cattlemen of the valley, the men who would be his neighbors. He had supposed they were all sticking together but now as he looked at them he realized that they had been in a heated argument and from the way they were standing he could see that it was two against one—Pete Oxwell and Homer Dixon on one side, Jim Martell on the other. Pete Oxwell said, "I ain't one for beating around the bush, York. I want to know how you stand."

Tony tried to find some hint on the faces of the men and he saw only hard bitterness. "I stand on my feet," Tony said and he grinned. "Right now I'll buy a drink for my neighbors."

"You'll talk first, Tony," Jim Martell said. He always spoke as if he had a gun in his hand, yet he never carried a weapon. "We hear there's a price on your head in Texas and that you're good at running cows at night. I want to know how much of your past you're bringing with you."

The tenseness was back in the muscles along Tony's jaws. Jim Martell was thinking of more than cows, and Tony knew it. Tony smiled with his mouth but his eyes were cold and hard. He looked at the men but he thought of the girl. He had told her everything there was to tell about himself, because he had wanted no secrets between them. He hadn't expected her to repeat it. He looked at Jim Martell and he said, "I came here to raise cows, boys."

"Maybe it's time somebody raised hell instead," Pete Oxwell said. "If you think so, York, me and Homer will back you up."

"And I won't, Tony," Jim Martell said softly. "I've been talking to Roscoe Cobb

and I know we can work this thing out. It would be a bad idea if you decided to show somebody how tough you were." Again he sounded as if he were a man ready to back his talk with a gun.

"I say it would be a hell of a good idea," Pete Oxwell said. "I'm sick of you bowing and scraping to Cobb, Jim."

Tony looked at Homer Dixon and Pete Oxwell and it was like going back six years and seeing his own dad and the others. These men had the same harassed look, the pinched features that told of frayed nerves and tempers held too long at the breaking point. Of the three, Martell was the only one Tony actually knew, for Martell was the girl's father. Tony spoke directly to him. "You were with me when I bought the Jordan place, Jim. You thought it was a good idea at the time."

"You didn't tell me everything, Tony," Jim Martell said. He was an extremely young man of fifty with only his iron grey hair to hint at his age. He had a steady way of looking at a man. Tony met that gaze.

"What I did in Texas had to be done," Tony said. "I'm here to raise cows, nothing more, and I'll do it alone."

"Getting a small spread is a long road, Tony," Jim Martell said. "Maybe a young fellow like you might get tired of waiting for money to come in and then he'd start figuring out ways to make it a little faster."

"Say what you're trying to say, Jim," Tony said softly.

"In a pinch a man has a way of turning back to the thing he's good at. If you'll let me, I can work out a deal with Cobb. If you get a little pressed for cash you might get to looking at the money Pete and Homer have got to spend."

Tony felt the flush crawling up his cheeks. "When I get ready to hire my guns I'll let you know," he said. He turned and left the saloon before his temper got the best of him and he mounted and left town without having the drink he had wanted.

He thought of Roscoe Cobb and the Rafter C, twice the size of any other spread in the valley, ten times the size of the one he had just bought for himself. He hadn't met Roscoe Cobb and he

didn't care to meet him. He knew that Pete Oxwell and Homer Dixon were having trouble with Cobb over graze. Jim Martell had told him these things, for Jim Martell had his troubles, too. But Martell was a man who thought things out and he believed he could get along with Roscoe Cobb. A year ago Tony York would have laughed in Martell's face and strapped on his gun. Now he wasn't so sure. Martell had a way of making a man think. It was none of his fight; no one was getting hurt and Tony intended to keep out of it.

He left the road and took the dim trail that cut over the hill and down into the valley. It was a trail that had become increasingly familiar during his short stay here a few months back and the small ranch house at the other end of it was almost like home. He had liked the feeling it gave him. He crossed the hill and came into the narrow valley and he saw the girl on the porch of the house, shading her eyes with her hand. He spurred his horse into a lope and when she recognized him she came running down the lane to meet him.

She was wearing a plain brown skirt and a simple white blouse with wide cut shoulders. Her hair was loose across her shoulders and her cheeks were rosy with the exertion of running. She wasn't over seventeen. Her lips were parted when she spoke his name and there were tears in her eyes. He dismounted slowly and stood in front of her and she came to him and put her arms around his neck.

He pushed her away and held her, looking into her eyes, searching her face. He said, "You told them about me, Hollis. Why?"

She made him kiss her before she would answer and then she stood with her head against his chest. "Of course I told them," she said. "Is there anything to be ashamed of?"

"Maybe they won't understand the way you do," he said.

She was a simple girl with a disarming directness. She had fallen in love with him and she had said so and she saw no reason to be coy about it. And because of her directness there was an amazing strength and determination about her. She looked at him and said, "Would they understand any better if they heard it through pieces

of gossip drifting slowly up the trail?"

THERE were some things about this new life he had chosen that he would have to learn, Tony York knew. This was not hiding in willow thickets and riding by night. This was meeting issues squarely and facing them, and in some things he would have to trust her to guide him. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled at her. "I didn't get a warm welcome in town."

"There's been more trouble," she said. "Cobb has been trying to keep cattle out of Spur Valley. I'm sure he and Dad will work something out if Oxxwell and Dixon will keep their heads. Pete and Homer say Cobb wants war. They say he's threatening to hire a gun crew."

He put his arm around her and kissed her again. "I don't care about that now," he said. "Not right now—"

They walked up the lane together, leading Tony's horse, and the sunset built bonfires in the windows of the house. They came to the yard where the hollyhocks grew tall along the fence and he had reached down to open the picket gate when they heard the riders coming.

He turned and saw them, four men riding easily, and he saw the worry in Hollis Martell's dark eyes. He opened the gate and let her go inside the yard, then he closed the gate and stood there, leaning against the fence, his hands steady as he rolled a cigarette. "Cobb's men?" he asked.

She nodded. "The one on the sorrel is Dahl, his foreman. I don't know the names of the others. They're new."

"They've been here before?"

"They want to talk to Dad about moving his cows out of Spur."

He heard the broken note in her voice and he looked at her quickly. She was frightened, and it was more than worry over men's arguments. He turned her toward him and looked into her eyes. "What else, Hollis?"

"It's nothing, Tony," she said. "I'll talk to them—"

He looked at the riders and he saw the broad, arrogant grin on the face of Dahl, the Rafter C foreman. Dahl lifted his hat, and his eyes were on Hollis. Tony said, "He been bothering you, Hollis?"

"Really, Tony, it's nothing—"

"You go along," he said quietly. "I'll take care of them."

Tony kept his eyes on Dahl. He was a big, red haired man with a wide chest and mammoth head set directly on his shoulders. He wore his holster tied down, a low-cut holster that held a scarred, cedar butt gun. The three men who rode with Dahl could have been picked up for gun wages on any range. Tony had seen fifty like them and he knew how to talk to them. The Rafter C riders pulled to a stop and the three gunmen folded their hands on their saddle horns, waiting for Dahl to do the talking. Dahl said, "Hello there, you beautiful wildcat. Your daddy home?" There were recent finger-nail scratches on Dahl's cheek.

Tony squinted his eyes as he looked up at Dahl. "No," he said, "her daddy's not home. But he told me to tell you to get the hell away from here and stay away." The three gunmen were suddenly erect in their saddles and Tony felt the slow temper building in Dahl.

MAN FROM MISSOURI ASKED TO BE SHOWN!



**And He Was!
Carl W. Rau Has
Now Switched to
Calvert Because
it Tastes Better.**

ST. LOUIS, MO.—Carl W. Rau, Missouri chemical engineer, is no longer a skeptic about the big switch to Calvert. "Friends showed me," he said. "Calvert really does taste better, really is smoother any way you drink it."

The foreman said, "Who in the hell are you, stranger?"

"Name of Tony York," Tony said. "I bought the Jordan place."

He heard Dahl's weight shifting in the saddle. "Maybe you're ignorant because you're new here," Dahl said. "We're Rafter C, and we're here on business." He dismounted easily. "I come here to talk to Jim Martell. Get out of the way, York. I'll go inside and visit while I wait."

Tony York shook his head and now he was smiling. "Get back on that horse."

He knew it was coming, just as he had known that Burr Ridkey would pull a gun. This was his business and it was part of his business to know when talking had reached an end. He didn't wait for Dahl; he jerked his gun and hit the hammer with the heel of his hand. The three shots rolled into one and the horses reared and plunged. Only then did he turn his attention to Dahl.

Dahl's knees were bent and his gun was half drawn. Tony fired and he saw Dahl's left leg go out from under him, spilling the Rafter C foreman in the dirt. At the same time Tony jumped, and ground his heel against Dahl's gun hand. He turned then, his gun cocked, and he moved it to cover the three riders who were fighting their horses. "Lift 'em boys," he said quietly. The gunmen did as they were told. They recognized a master of the trade when they saw one.

Tony picked up Dahl's gun and then with a six-shooter in each hand he backed over against the fence. He was smiling that same, tight smile that ignored his eyes. "Get up, Dahl," he said, and he watched the foreman get to his feet, stumble and fall again. "I said get up," Tony said.

Dahl's right hand was broken and the skin was ripped where Tony's boot heel had ground into the flesh. There was a wicked flesh wound in his left leg below the knee and it was spurting blood. The Rafter C foreman's face was twisted with pain as he got to his knees, then to his feet, and he dragged his left leg as he hobbled toward his horse. One of the gunmen started to help Dahl into the saddle and Tony said, "He's supposed to be tough. Let him make it alone!" He

backed up his order by tilting the gun and the rider raised his hands again.

He heard the gate open behind him but he couldn't turn to see what the girl was up to. She walked straight to Dahl who was fumbling with a stirrup, trying to keep his balance, and she put her arm around his waist. They struggled there and her body was pressed close to Dahl's as she tried to help him into the saddle. Tony felt the color draining from his cheeks. You didn't give an inch to a man like Dahl. You'd pay for it later if you did. And yet he couldn't bring himself to say anything to Hollis.

She got Dahl into the saddle and she stood there, her face flushed, her eyes steady. Dahl reached down with his left hand and let it lay a moment on her chestnut hair. "That's better, honey," he said then. "Maybe you and me will learn to get along yet."

Tony's voice was like a whip. "Don't come back, Dahl."

The pain was still on Dahl's face but his voice was steady. "I'll see you, York," he said.

"I'll be looking for you," Tony said. He stepped forward and raked a gunsight across the rump of Dahl's horse. The animal jumped and Dahl had to grip the saddle horn. The three gunmen reined their mounts and headed down the lane. He turned then and saw the girl looking at him.

Her face was white, her eyes puzzled. It was as if she were looking at a stranger. A dangerous stranger. "Tony, you didn't give them a chance!" She whispered it and he knew he was hearing a thought—a worry that had been in her mind.

"I told you about myself," he said simply. "It wasn't pretty, but you said you understood. Dahl and those others are my kind of people. I know how to talk to them." He had known that this conversation would have to come up between them and he had awakened at nights thinking about it.

"But Dad was working out a deal with them. You could have used some tact."

"You don't deal with that kind," Tony said softly, "except with a gun."

"Tony, you don't believe in anything except guns, do you?" He looked at her and he knew he couldn't answer that. He

needed more time to think about it before he could be sure. He thrust Dahl's gun into the waistband of his trousers and mounted his horse. He didn't look at her when he said, "You tell your dad to leave his cows in Spur Valley." He touched the reins against the neck of the sorrel and headed for his own place across the shoulder of the hill. He knew she was standing there at the gate, framed by the hollyhocks.

CHAPTER

2

No Guns for Hire

For a moment, as he rested on the hill and looked down into the valley at the ranch he had bought, the past was a long way behind Tony York and he was looking at the future. It was the same feeling he had felt that night when he awoke with the rain in his face and made his decision. But now it was more than a dream; it was real. This was his land—his new beginning. He was here and he was here to stay. But there was one thing more needed to make it complete, and now he had to admit that it was the biggest part. There was Hollis Martell. He had acted in the only way he knew and she had disproved.

He rode down the slope toward the cabin and for first time since he could remember he had a gnawing feeling of insecurity inside him and he couldn't shake it. It wasn't a fear of Roscoe Cobb and his Rafter C; he was confident he could handle that, if it ever came up. Burr Ridkey had pounded that confidence into him and Tony had seen it work. He had had it when he faced Burr, telling him he was pulling out. He had had it again this evening when he faced Dahl and his riders. But now there were other things.

He remembered how Pete Oxwell and Homer Dixon and especially Jim Martell had looked at him there in the saloon and he remembered that Hollis had told things about him that he had supposed were to be secrets between them. Perhaps she had been right in telling; he supposed that she had been. But he knew she had condemned him for the way he had handled Dahl, and he knew Jim Martell no longer trusted him. These were the things that gave him his insecurity now. This was a

new role he would have to play and he would have to play it until he had the same confidence in it that he had with a gun in his hand. Martell, somehow, was like that. His horse raised its head and nickered and Tony York was suddenly alert, his hand on his gun. He looked ahead and there was a rider waiting in the yard in front of his cabin.

The man on the horse was no one Tony had ever seen before. He wore an expensive cream colored Stetson and beautifully tailored saddle pants. There was a silver studded martingale on the palomino horse and the saddle was well decorated with silver from the broad, low cantle down to the ornate taps of the stirrups. The man was smooth shaven and his round face had a ruddy glow about it. He waited there, a regal arrogance in his bearing, watching Tony ride down the slope, and he raised his right hand in greeting.

Tony stopped his horse six feet away from his visitor and his eyes asked the man to speak. The rider's voice was well modulated and there was a hint of education in his speech. He said, "Are you Tony York?"

"I am," Tony said.

"I'm Roscoe Cobb," the rider said. "You've heard of me?"

"Maybe," Tony said. "What's on your mind?"

"You, mostly," Cobb said. "I heard you're moving in here."

"You hear right," Tony said. "Any objection?"

Roscoe Cobb laughed, and it made Tony feel as if he had just committed a breach of etiquette of some kind. "Of course not," Cobb said. "This is just a social call. I understand you met my foreman?"

"I met him," Tony said. "We didn't get along."

"Dahl is a bit clumsy," Roscoe Cobb said. "He should have sized you up better."

"You have?" Tony asked.

Roscoe Cobb smiled. "I make it my business to know what goes on," he said. "For example, I have a good friend in Ben County down in Texas."

"Maybe I know him," Tony said. He was more alert now. He noticed how Cobb sat his saddle and he noticed that

the man carried no gun. Most of all he noticed the confidence in the man—that certain sureness that marked a man of ability.

"You know him," Cobb said. "You and Burr Ridkey wrecked a ranch for him."

"News gets around," Tony said.

"Yes, it does," Cobb said. "I was very interested in the way things went down there. Of course," he added, "it meant nothing to me, one way or the other, but it seemed a shame that a man as big as Steve Pardee should have let a few gun-slingers break him."

"You would have handled it different, maybe?"

"Yes, I would have," Cobb said. He met Tony's eyes and held them. "You boys were pretty good, but there's always someone a little bit better. I would have made it my business to find that someone."

"You're telling me that's what you plan to do here?"

"If they force me to," Roscoe Cobb said. "I can't afford to make mistakes." He took a cigar from his vest pocket and bit the end from it. "You take Dahl, now. He was the wrong man for the job. I have no sympathy for him. I fired him."

"Good foremen are scarce," Tony said.

"I realize that," Cobb said. "That's why I'm willing to make you a good proposition."

"Me?"

"Of course," Cobb said. "You've earned it, haven't you? You whipped the best man I had and backed down three drifters who were supposed to be good. Frankly, I admire your performance very much. A man with your talent doesn't need to get himself killed siding a couple of sore-head maverickers like Oxwell and Dixon."

"I'm siding no one, Cobb," Tony said.

"It was personal between me and Dahl."

"Then keep it that way," Cobb said, lighting the cigar and inhaling the smoke. "I'm still offering you a job."

"It's no go, Cobb," Tony said.

He reined his horse and rode around the rancher and toward the barn, not looking back. The faint aroma of the cigar was in the air and there was a tightness in the pit of Tony's stomach. Burr had

taught him how to read the signs. Roscoe Cobb had all the earmarks of a man who wouldn't quit or scare. He dismounted and put his horse in the barn and when he came back out Roscoe Cobb was gone and the chewed butt of the new cigar was there on the ground. Tony went into the cabin and built a fire in the iron stove.

He listened to the night come into the mountains as he made his supper and then he sat a long time in the dark, smoking a cigarette and thinking. He had a new respect for Pete Oxwell and Homer Dixon, for he realized that they had appraised Roscoe Cobb correctly. They had sized him up as a man who had no intention of compromising and a man who was willing to pay for what he got. But Tony York had nothing to sell any more. He had taken six years of the best training a man could get and thrown it out the window because he wanted something else. He caught himself wondering what Burr Ridkey and Scotty and Zukor Dean were doing tonight.

He felt no animosity toward Burr Ridkey, even though the man had tried to kill him. He had crossed Ridkey up in a deal and he understood the penalty for that. It was the way Ridkey had trained him and it was what he could expect. In a strange way he felt almost an affection for the gunman with whom he had ridden for six years. They had gone hungry together, shared good times together, and more important, they had shared danger together.

A chill came into the valley and Tony closed the door and opened the front of the stove for light. He stopped for a second, realizing what he had done, and then he laughed and found a kerosene lamp and lighted it. Old habits were hard to break. That's what Jim Martell and Pete Oxwell and Homer were thinking. And perhaps that was what Hollis was thinking tonight. He felt a deep loneliness such as he had never known.

Morning came swiftly and Tony York awakened with the certain panic of knowing he was being watched.

He had been dead tired and the straw tick on the bed had been soft, the blankets caressingly comfortable. He had slept sounder than he had slept in years and for a second he told himself that this was

the reason for his uneasiness. It was just the change of being under a roof and getting a full night's sleep. The feeling wouldn't leave and he knew he was fooling himself. He turned back the blankets and his hand reached for the gun that was under the pillow. An old, familiar voice said, "Don't do it, kid."

TONY remained exactly in the position in which he had stopped—half turned, his hand reaching toward the pillow. There was a movement outside and then a shadow fell across the window directly opposite his bunk. He saw the shoulders first, then the grinning face. Burr Ridkey knocked the glass from the window with the muzzle of his six-shooter and leaned inside the cabin. "You see, kid?" he said. "One night under a roof and you forget everything I taught you." He threw back his head then and laughed, and it was a rare sound for Burr Ridkey.

The door opened and Scotty and Zukor Dean came in. Scotty said, "Hi, Tony," and he ducked his head in that way he had of doing. Zukor Dean leaned against the wall, a straw in his mouth, his thumbs hooked in his gun belt. He didn't speak and he let his moody eyes roam around the room. Ridkey's head and shoulders left the window and then he was standing in the door. "Wonder you wouldn't invite an old friend in," he said.

Tony got out of bed, moving slowly, keeping his hand away from the pillow. "I reckon I made a mistake when I didn't shoot, once I had the drop on you, Burr," he said slowly.

"That's right," Burr said.

"Well, don't you make the same one," Tony said. He nodded toward the gun in Ridkey's hand.

Ridkey grinned his flat, mirthless smile, a smile that Tony had learned to imitate. Without any warning he dropped his gun into it's holster. "You got guts, kid," he said. "Let's talk about it after breakfast." He nudged Scotty with his elbow. "That black thing there is called a stove," he said. "You build a fire inside it and cook on top of it."

"The hell you say?" Scotty said.

There was a vague feeling of comradeship in the room—a meeting of old saddle mates who had shared much. But there

was also the sinking feeling that it was all over and there was nothing more in common. Tony York dressed slowly and he noticed that Zukor Dean's hand was never far from his gun.

Burr Ridkey pushed himself back from the sawbuck table and laced his hands across his lean middle. His hair was mussed and it stood up in two peaks above each temple, giving him a Satanic appearance. "You got something good here, Tony," he said. "You messed me up down south so I figured I'd come up and share some of this with you."

"I've got a little graze and a few cows," Tony said.

Burr Ridkey shook his head. "I came through town and I looked around a bit." He picked his front teeth with his thumbnail. "Signs are easy to read. The big fish are about to eat the little fish. They'll do it, too, unless the little fish get a new set of teeth."

"It's no go, Burr," Tony said. "You're not hiring your guns around here."

"Now there you go," Burr said, "telling me how to run my business."

"You get messed up in it I'll kill you, Burr," Tony said softly.

Burr Ridkey locked his hands behind his neck and stretched luxuriously. He spoke through a wide yawn. "Is she pretty, Tony?"

Tony York dropped the front legs of his chair to the floor and reached for his tobacco. He saw Burr Ridkey, still leaning back, looking down his nose with an owl's wisdom in his eyes.

Tony's fingers had stiffened and he ruined the cigarette he was rolling. "Lay off, Burr," he said quietly.

"All right, kid," Burr said. "I just tried to raise you right, that's all. I gave you the gun savvy you needed but I missed someplace along the line in your thinking. That keeps puttin' you and me on opposite sides of the pasture, kid. One of us is gonna have to find out who's right."

"Now, Burr?" Tony said.

Burr Ridkey shook his head. "For what?" he said. "I say there's some money to be made here. They're saying in town that this Roscoe Cobb is hiring guns. Your little boys are steamed up about it. I listened to this Pete Oxwell

and Homer Dixon talk. They're starting to think right. All they need is a little push, and you can give it to 'em, Tony. Your man Martell is one of the milk and honey boys, but he'll come along when he sees he can make money out of it. They always do." He cut his speech abruptly and got to his feet with that lazy, deadly movement Tony knew so well. His head was cocked to one side and his gun was in his hand. Through the broken window they heard the faint pounding of hooves.

They saw the rider coming down the slope and Ridkey motioned with his head. "Go on out, Tony," he said. "We'll stay here in the cabin." He peered through the window again. "Who is it?"

"I can't tell," Tony lied, and his voice was dry in his throat. Even at this distance he had recognized Hollis Martell and he saw the urgency in the way she rode. He went outside and started toward the corral. Burr Ridkey's voice ordered him to stay near the cabin.

The girl threw herself from the horse and stumbled when she hit the ground. Tony caught her in his arms and she jerked away from him angrily. She had been crying and the tears were still close. He had never seen anger in her before but now it was there and there was something more. Her lips were tight and the color was gone from her cheeks. "I hope you're satisfied, Tony," she said. "Cobb's riders are moving into Spur."

"Didn't you expect they would?" he asked.

"No," she said flatly. "Dad had a talk with Cobb last night and he had things worked out. When Cobb found out about you and Dahl he accused us of hiring a gunman and he said he'd have to meet force with force."

"I told you I was through with hiring my gun, Hollis," he said quietly.

"But you'll fight, won't you?" she accused. "You wouldn't try to talk to a man. You'd draw a gun and break his leg and enjoy seeing him suffer because that's what you are and that's all you ever will be." He started toward her and she slapped him across the face. "Keep away from me, Tony," she said, and now her voice was barely audible. "And keep away from Spur. Dad and I don't need

a killer to help us." She mounted her horse and he stood there, watching her ride away, seeing the full drive of her bitterness in the way she lashed her horse. He turned and Burr Ridkey was leaning in the doorway, picking his teeth with a splinter of wood. He was smiling.

"I want my gun, Burr," Tony said. He started walking toward Ridkey, his hands at his side.

"Going someplace?" Ridkey said.

"Maybe," Tony said. "I want my gun." He kept walking forward.

"I think me and the boys will ride along," Ridkey said.

"I don't want you," Tony said.

"There's nothing you can do about it," Burr Ridkey said. He didn't turn his head. "Get the horses, Scotty."

"My gun, Burr?"

"Go to hell," Burr Ridkey said.

Tony lunged, his fist driving for Burr's jaw. The blow was never completed. Burr's six-shooter rammed hard against Tony's middle. Tony twisted, his hand grabbing for the weapon. It lifted and the barrel cracked against the side of his head, spilling him in the dirt. He got to his feet, blood running down his cheek. Burr said, "Behave, Tony. I don't want to kill you yet."

Scotty and Zukor Dean were in the doorway and they both had guns. Tony shook his head and wiped the blood from his face. He kept thinking of Jim Martell, remembering the soft way the man had of speaking, the firm belief he had that things could be worked out peacefully. And he remembered his meeting with Roscoe Cobb. He knew Martell would be down at the entrance to Spur Valley, still anxious to talk things out. And he knew that Hollis would probably be with him. He couldn't stand here and argue because all he could do was lose. He turned and started toward the barn and he reeled when he walked. Behind him Burr Ridkey said, "Get the horses, Scotty."

CHAPTER

3

Lobo Snaps Back

They crossed the two ridges and rode down the canyon that led to the valley that lay like a hand in the cup of the

hills. This was Spur, watered by three streams, sheltered in winter, with grass as high as a beef's belly. It was free graze, shared by Oxwell, Dixon, and Martell and Tony had hoped that someday they would invite him into the pool. It was graze that Roscoe Cobb wanted and from his one meeting with the man Tony felt Roscoe Cobb would have it unless he was stopped all the way. But maybe he was wrong. Maybe Martell's way was right. They looked down on the valley and saw the two riders waiting there at the pass a hundred yards below them. Hollis and Jim Martell. Tony didn't look at the three men who rode with him. "Stay out of it, boys," he said. "There's nothing in it for you."

He knew that Jim Martell was unarmed; he never packed a gun and he was still trying to work it out. They saw the Rafter C riders then, six men with Roscoe Cobb riding out ahead of them. The riders stopped and waited and Cobb came riding on toward the Martells, his right hand raised in greeting. He, too, was unarmed and for a swift second Tony had the sinking feeling that perhaps he had been wrong. Perhaps he had lived too long with violence and had come to the point where he suspected everyone. Maybe Hollis had been right when she accused him of being hard and bitter and cruel. Burr Ridkey's soft voice jarred him. "This here is too damn peaceful to be profitable."

Ridkey had drawn his saddle carbine from its scabbard and now he levered in a shell. Tony made a grab for the gun and Zukor Dean's sepulchral voice stopped him. "Watch it, Tony." He knew Dean

had a gun in his hand. There was a hard glitter in Burr Ridkey's eyes as he laid the stock of the rifle against his cheek. He squeezed the trigger and as the report cracked across the valley one of the Rafter C cowboys stood in his stirrups. His horse reared and the Rafter C rider went over backwards.

There was a tangle of horses as Roscoe Cobb wheeled and started back down the valley. The Rafter C men spurred their mounts and headed for the Martells. Tony saw the tight grin on Burr Ridkey's face as his old boss jerked a six-shooter from its holster and spurred his horse. "Come along, Tony," Ridkey said, swinging the gun. "I need you to introduce me to the right people and you are going to do it right now."

They rode straight toward the Rafter C riders, Burr Ridkey, Scotty, Zukor Dean and Tony York, and for that interval it was like old times again and the present was gone. Two more riders came across the pass and Tony recognized Pete Oxwell and Homer Dixon. Tony's hand went to his holster and he felt helpless when he found it empty and he was back with the present. Burr Ridkey didn't take chances.

The complete element of surprise and the upsetting of their plans unnerved the Rafter C riders. They turned and headed back down the valley and Tony and Burr, joined by Oxwell and Dixon now, followed a way and then gave up the chase. As they reined up Pete Oxwell was breathing hard with excitement. "Them Rafter C punchers was just gettin' ready to start it," he puffed. "I know dam well they was! Now maybe Jim will be con-

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vinced that he can't pussyfoot no more." He looked at Burr Ridkey. "I don't know you, stranger," he said, "but you sure come along at a good time."

"I'm a good friend of Tony's," Burr Ridkey said. "He said you boys was having trouble and might need a little help."

Jim and Hollis Martell had ridden up now and Jim Martell's eyes ran swiftly over the tied holsters of Scotty, the low slung gun of Zukor Dean and the hard pinched face of Burr Ridkey. Tony looked at Hollis and he saw the tears in her eyes. "You couldn't change, could you Tony?" she said. "You've got a war now. I hope you're satisfied." She jerked her pony savagely and spurred it into a run back toward the ranch.

Tony had watched Burr Ridkey operate before. Burr didn't give a damn whether Jim Martell or any of the rest of these men lived or died, but if there was a chance of making a little money by keeping them on top he'd do it. He had given a sample of his wares and now he was ready to talk business. He would drive a hard bargain, Tony knew, and when he could no longer collect gun wages he would turn against the men who had paid him. Ridkey made a cigarette and as he licked the paper he said, "You boys want to talk a little business?"

"Not with you, Burr," Tony said.

"I'll talk," Pete Oxwell said. "You got to fight fire with fire, don't you?"

"We're not hiring guns," Jim Martell said. "If you planned it this way, Tony, you made a mistake. Maybe you and your boys had better keep riding."

"You give a man a lot of thanks for saving your life, don't you?" Burr Ridkey said.

"The same thanks I give a rattlesnake for buzzing his tail," Jim Martell said.

"Damn it to hell, Jim," Pete Oxwell exploded. "You mean to sit there and say you still think we can deal with Roscoe Cobb?"

"No," Jim Martell said, shaking his head. "Not now. We could have, but not now. We can't deal with Cobb, but we might be able to avoid bloodshed and that's what I intend to do. I've got four riders. With myself, that's five who'll stay out until we're pushed into it. I'll fight when there's something to fight about."

"When you added up your side you sort of left me out, didn't you Jim?" Tony York's voice was steady but his hand shook as he rolled his cigarette.

"I reckon you've shown your stripes, Tony," Martell said. "You came up here running from the law and a few days later your own gun crew shows up. Did that happen by accident or did you figure there'd be some good pickings on this range?"

"He figured there'd be some good pickings," Burr Ridkey said. "He figured that if you couldn't pay us maybe Roscoe Cobb could."

Tony York's voice was tight in his throat. "You're a damn liar, Burr."

"I'm just sayin' what you said," Burr Ridkey said. "What the hell? This is a business proposition and I'm putting my cards on the table. You boys want us for you or against you?"

"Damn it, I want you with us," Pete Oxwell said. "How about you, Homer?"

"We got to fight," Homer Dixon said. "I reckon I'd feel better about it with a few extra guns on my side. What's your price, York?"

Tony's mouth had pulled into hard, tight lines and he crushed the cigarette in his hand. "You can't pay it, Dixon," he said flatly. "I came up here with the idea I could tromp my own snakes and I still feel the same way. I'm not asking for any help and I'm not giving any and you can all go to hell." He reined his horse and his hand was on his empty holster. "I'll see you later, Burr."

"Any time, Tony," Burr Ridkey said. "Any time at all."

He rode back toward his own place and the anger was like a live coal in his stomach. He had made up his mind to build a new life for himself; he had told Hollis about it and she had believed him and now here he was heading right back into the middle of the thing he had left. He could fight for Oxwell and Dixon and he could be a gun hero and in time the same old disputes would come up. There'd be a killing someplace and men would whisper that Tony York, the kid killer, was using his gun again. You started out trying to help men you figured deserved help and you wound up with your face on a poster. He had lived through it once

and his final thanks had been in living the life of a coyote. He looked back once and he saw Pete Oxwell and Burr Ridkey shaking hands.

THE first thing he did when he arrived back at the cabin was to dig into his bed roll and get out the extra six-shooter he kept there. It was exactly like the gun Ridkey had taken away from him. He wiped it carefully and dropped it into his holster.

He fixed a meal of bacon and beans but he couldn't eat it and he sat there in the dark, smoking, thinking, momentarily hating himself and hating the world. He had had a dream about a little place and a wife and now the dream was gone and he realized suddenly that a man with his past had no right to dreams. His life had been built on revenge and destruction and his pay was the role of a lone wolf. He thought of Burr Ridkey and he knew it would be just a matter of time. Ridkey was through with him now; he didn't need him any more. That business of not shooting at the cabin this morning had been well planned. Ridkey had let him ride off untouched this afternoon because it would have been bad business to shoot an unarmed man in front of Oxwell and Dixon. But Ridkey could be himself from here on. There'd be no more compromise.

The night was charged with the stillness of wind laced pines and whispering grass. A pine knot sputtered once in the stove and the escaping steam from damp wood hissed into the ashes. It was a black night with a chill in the air and every sound magnified. Tony York heard the unmistakable sound of a horse and he felt his gun in the darkness and flexed his fingers.

The rider was coming down the slope, coming slowly, feeling his way in the darkness. Tony went to the door and waited and out in the corral his horse nickered a welcome and was answered. Tony heard the rider's soft order to the horse; there was a moment of silence, then the rider's voice. "I'm coming in, Tony." It was Jim Martell.

There was a strange mixture of emotions in Tony York. He had thought a lot about Martell since he had first met the man. He had admired his ability to

keep a cool head and reason things out. He had found in the man everything he wanted to find in himself, and then today he had seen what he had supposed was the shallowness of a reformer. Jim Martell had been ready to jump to conclusions and he had been completely dogmatic about it. Tony said, "What do you want, Jim?"

"I want to talk to you," Martell said.

"Haven't you talked enough, Jim?"

"No," Jim Martell said. "I'm coming in."

He heard the horse coming down the slope and then he could see the outline of movement, then the lumpy, black shadow as man and rider took shape within his orbit of vision. Jim Martell rode up to the cabin, holding his horse in a slow walk. Tony felt the tightness of the skin on his face, the prickling on his back. "That's far enough, Jim," he said. "What do you want?"

"I made a mistake, Tony," Jim Martell said.

"About hiring guns?"

"About you," Martell said. "Is the coffee hot?"

He stood aside as Martell dismounted and entered the cabin. The room was full of thick, warm darkness and Tony backed over to the table and lighted the lamp, setting the chimney on the table, striking the match with his left hand. When the wick's fire was yellow and smoke-tipped he set the chimney in place and turned down the wick until it was burning with a low, sawtoothed flame.

He looked at Jim Martell then and the shadows were in the seams of the man's face, making him look older than his years. He stood at one side of the room with his back against the wall, his hands in the pockets of his sheepskin lined coat. His skin had a grey, tired look. "You going along with them, Jim?" Tony said.

Jim Martell shook his head. "No, Tony. No more than you are."

There was complete honesty here, much the same as the honesty he had found in Hollis the night she had told him she loved him. There was no answer. Tony said, "I'll make some coffee."

He turned his back on Martell and got the coffee from a shelf. He took a dipper of water from a bucket and put it into the pot. Jim Martell wanted to talk.

The feel of it was in the room. "I didn't notice your empty holster until you rode off," Martell said. "After you left I listened to Burr Ridkey make his deal with Pete."

"A man gets tired of being called a liar," Tony said.

"I know," Jim Martell said. "I had years of it. It took me twenty years to get to the place where people could forget I used to hire my gun."

Tony turned and he saw Jim Martell sitting there with his hands laced between his knees. He saw the leanness of the man, the eternal youth of a man who has lived with danger, the tiredness of a man who has had to make a battle. "I've never packed a gun since Hollis was born," he said. "I reckon I was too narrow to see that someone else might do what I've done. When you walked out on it this afternoon I knew better."

"So where does it put us, Jim?" Tony asked.

"I'm not asking for help, Tony," Jim Martell said. "I never have. I quit picking fights, but I didn't start backing down from them. Roscoe Cobb has never taken anything from me. As long as he doesn't, I'll stand pat."

"I reckon we understand each other then, Jim," Tony York said. He had a strange sense of being a part of something. There was a fleeting moment in which he wondered if this was the thing he had sensed could exist—the thing that had made him walk out on the past.

There was more to be said, but it was best said in silence. The coffee boiled and the fragrance of it was in the room. Tony got cups and the two men drank and Tony thought of the long road ahead of him—the road Jim Martell had traveled and now he wondered why he hadn't recognized it before. He wondered how it must have been when Hollis told her dad all she knew of Tony York and admitted that she was in love with a gunman. There were no excuses nor explanations to be made now; there was no pardon to be begged. There was only the hope that Jim Martell would believe his daughter had met a man who had strength. And when Tony thought of that kind of strength it made his fighting ability seem puny. He had to say something to reassure the

man, to help him to understand better.

"I'm in love with Hollis, Jim."

Jim Martell stared into his cup and it was as if he were looking into the past. "That's enough, then," he said finally. "I was in love with her mother."

It had all been said. Out there in the night Burr Ridkey and Scotty and Zukor Dean were about their deadly work or they were hovered over a tiny fire counting their profits before they earned them. Pete Oxwell and Homer Dixon would go to war. They might win and they might lose, and if they lost then perhaps it would come to Jim Martell and to Tony York. But if it did it would come to two men who had learned the hard way that there is no disgrace in fighting a defensive fight. Tony poured more coffee.

THE sound of horses crashed into the night and snapped the men back to the present. Tony's rifle was standing in the corner. He got it and stood it by Jim Martell's chair and then he cupped his hand around the chimney of the lamp and blew out the flame. The old familiar sound of a gun being drawn from leather lay in the room. There was no word between the two men.

Tony stood in the door of the cabin and he tried to figure the number of riders. Six, as close as he could make it. It probably wasn't Burr Ridkey, then. A thin, high-pitched voice started calling his name. Behind him Martell said, "That's Pete Oxwell."

Martell had re-lighted the lamp by the time Oxwell and his riders reached the cabin. In the patch of light spilling from the open door Tony saw that Homer Dixon was along. The other riders were men he recognized as Oxwell's and Dixon's regular riders—eight men in all. Oxwell's face was pasty grey and he threw himself from the saddle like a man who is exhausted by excitement rather than by riding. He stumbled when he started toward the door. "There's hell to pay, York. York, we're gonna have to have your gun. We'll pay any price." He saw Jim Martell then. "Jim! I'm glad you're here!"

"Make sense, Pete," Martell said sharply.

"Roscoe Cobb is dead," Oxwell said, fighting with his voice. "Burr Ridkey killed him, not over two hours ago."

"Wasn't that what you wanted, Pete?" Martell said.

Oxwell sat down on the doorstep and held his face in his hands. "Damned if I know what I wanted, Jim," he said. "But I didn't want what I got. Ridkey and his men double-crossed us. They've joined up with Dahl and a couple more gunhawks Cobb had and they've taken over Rafter C. They're after the whole damn valley, Jim. They're headed for your place right now!"

Tony York was to remember later that he grew up during that ride to Martells. Without asking or saying he had become the leader of these men. Not because of any gun prowess they knew he possessed, but because this was his fight now. If he had never carried a gun in his life he would still have been the leader because this was a fight between Tony York and the man who had taught him his trade—the death struggle of the wolf cub turning on the leader of the pack. They listened to his plans and they rode behind him and Jim Martell gripped a saddle carbine in his hand.

But to Tony York it was more than that. If it had been merely the settling of old scores it would have been the pattern of revenge over again. Of the men who rode behind him only Jim Martell could have sensed the real feelings of Tony York, for both of them were thinking of Hollis and they were thinking of a man with a bandaged leg riding through the night. Dahl. There was no thought of saving cattle or holding

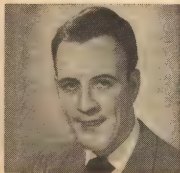
the boundary line of a ranch or settling a dispute between men. Tony spurred more speed from his horse.

It was thin morning when they came to the ridge that was above the Martell place. There was a grey light outlining the silent buildings and there was no sign of Martell's riders. They rode carefully now until they were within a hundred yards of the barn and then they heard the sound. A high pitched, terrified scream. It came from the house. Every man spurred his horse and they rode straight into a gun trap. Tony saw Martell's horse go down. He saw one of Pete Oxwell's riders pitch out of the saddle. And then he was low on his horse's withers, racing toward the house.

Lead reached out for him and a bullet caught his horse, spilling him hard. He got to his feet, half dazed, and lead knocked the hat from his head. Behind him he heard the rapid firing of Jim Martell's rifle, covering for him. He vaulted the fence into the yard and made the protection of the porch. Inside the house Hollis screamed again.

He smashed his shoulder against the door, splintering it from its lock. He kicked it open and he was half way across the room when he saw the struggling shapes in the hall. He knew that the hulking, thick-necked man who held her was Dahl.

Tony had his gun in his hand but there was no chance to fire. He threw himself on Dahl, slashing with the gun barrel. The Rafter C's ex-foreman turned to meet the attack and his crippled leg buckled. He fell heavily and Tony fired twice before the man ever had a chance



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to reach for his gun. Hollis was in his arms then, calling his name. Outside the firing picked up a new tempo.

He pushed her away and ordered her into the bedroom and then he ran to a side window and smashed out the glass. He could see shadowy figures moving around outside but it was hard to tell who they were. There were two horsemen out there now—Martell's men, he figured. He remembered that Martell had had four working for him. Near the barn he saw a man pressed against the wall and he recognized the somber form of Zukor Dean. He fired once.

There was little good he could do here, he knew. He had to get out there and get into it. He heard the soft movement behind him and he turned quickly, his gun ready. It was Hollis. She had a rifle and she dropped to her knees beside him there at the window.

The light was stronger and he could see her face, void of all color, pulled into a tight mask. She said, "They came about a half hour ago. Our men tried to lead them off. I thought they were all gone. Dad told me about you, Tony, and he told me about himself."

"Your dad's all right, Hollis," he said, answering the question she was afraid to ask. "Roscoe Cobb is dead. That's Burr Ridkey out there. Pete Oxwell hired him and he double-crossed them."

She knew he was trying to explain his part. She moved closer to him and put her hand up to touch his face. "It wouldn't make any difference, Tony," she said. "Nothing could ever make any difference between us again." He put his arm around her and he kissed her lips. She clung to him until he pushed her away.

A bullet crashed through the shattered glass of the window and he pushed her down against the floor. He crawled then and he lifted the gun from Dahl's holster. He saw her shudder as he touched the dead body, then he ran for the door and out onto the porch. There was a man out by the barn. Tony fired once, driving the man to cover. He ran across the yard and through the gate and he threw himself behind the body of his horse. A bullet thudded into the seat of the saddle.

At the window of the house the rifle started firing methodically and somewhere

off to his right another rifle picked up the crossfire. These were the Martells. These were his people now and he would learn to live their way. He fired and felt the hammer fall on an empty cylinder and he jerked Dahl's gun from the waistband of his trousers.

JIM MARTELL'S rifle cracked again and Scotty came out from behind the barn. He had a gun in each hand and he was walking with a crazy, jerking motion, his head bobbing on his scrawny neck. He kept trying to lift those guns. Martell's rifle cracked again and Scotty went to his knees and fell forward. The two horsemen made a wild charge straight toward the barn, and Pete Oxwell's men, out at the corral, shifted position and poured a concentrated fire toward Ridkey's hiding place. Two men came out, their hands over their heads.

He saw then that one gunman was hiding in the barn and he knew it was Burr Ridkey. One of Oxwell's men came out into the open and the gun in the barn exploded, the sound hollow and muffled by the walls. Oxwell's man dropped and started to crawl back toward the corral. Martell came out from behind the tool shed and Tony yelled a warning. Martell jumped back and the bullet from the barn clawed splinters from the corner of the shed.

Tony took time to reload his own gun and now there was dead silence and the first rim of the sun touched the tops of the mountains. He called out. "Come on out, Burr. You can't last it out alone."

"I can have a lot of fun trying," Burr Ridkey yelled back.

"We'll come in behind you and burn you out," Tony said.

"Why don't you try it?" Ridkey invited.

Tony knew Burr Ridkey well enough to know that it wasn't all bluff. The man had himself in a position where he could cover all sides of the barn. Sooner or later they'd whip him, just by sheer weight of numbers, but somebody was going to get killed in the process. The silence became maddening and the sun came up.

Every man was frozen to his post, fully aware now that Ridkey could spot them. Oxwell, Dixon and their men were in the

corral, protected only by the fence and the posts. Martell's two riders had rounded up the gunmen who had surrendered and they had withdrawn a few hundred yards up the slope. Jim Martell was trapped behind the tool shed. Tony York raised his head over the back of the dead horse. "You want to make this personal, Burr?"

"Come on in," Burr invited. "We'll talk it over."

"Will you give me a chance to get to the barn?"

Burr Ridkey laughed. "What do you think?"

He hadn't expected to make a deal with Burr; he had only wanted to stall for time. He had both guns fully loaded now and he took a deep breath. Pulling his gun belts tight around the middle he bunched his legs and jumped over the horse. When he hit the ground he sprawled full length and he heard two bullets go over his head. He got to his feet and started to run—crow hopping, zig-zagging. The rifle in the window cracked twice and Burr's next bullet went that way. He reached the door of the barn and threw himself against the wall. A bullet punctured the sliding door. Burr Ridkey's voice said, "You're lucky so far, Tony. You coming on in?"

Tony pressed his ear against the wall, trying to locate the voice. It seemed to be coming from above him.

He knew what he needed to know now. Burr Ridkey was there above him. Getting to him was another thing. He tried to remember everything about gun fighting that Burr Ridkey had ever taught him. He slipped his own gun into its holster and shifted Dahl's gun to his right hand. There was a halter chain looped through a hole in the manger. He unsnapped it carefully, then gripping the balled length in his left hand he tossed it toward the end of the manger.

The chain hit with a clatter and Ridkey's gun crashed twice. The chain jumped and before it was still Tony was on his feet. He held the six-shooter close to his chest, gripping it hard with his right hand. The heel of his left hand slammed the hammer and the six shots rolled into one as he jerked the muzzle back and forth and spilled the bullets

into the mow. There was a sudden movement, a blast of sound that seemed to reach all the way through him. He was hit and hit hard, he knew, but now he was a machine that was operating in a preset, mechanical plan.

It seemed an eternity before he heard Burr Ridkey's voice. An eternity in which he gripped the manger for support and felt the blood seep through his clothing. "You hit me, Tony," Ridkey said. "You hit me hard." He could hear the man's heavy breathing. "Come on out where I can see you, Tony."

Tony gritted his teeth against the pain that was just now stabbing him. "Throw down your gun first, Burr."

There was a long silence and then Burr laughed. It was a choking sound. "Gettin' smart, ain't you Tony?" He heard the rustling movement in the straw and then Burr Ridkey's gun clattered into the manger.

Tony pushed himself erect and he tried to stand as if nothing were wrong. "I'm sorry, Burr." He kept remembering the nights they had ridden together, the rough comradeship that had been between them.

"Me too," Ridkey said, and now he was having trouble speaking. "We had a good thing here. We could have taken over everything. You and me. Partners—"

"You'd a shot me in the back the first chance you had," Tony said.

Burr Ridkey made a poor attempt at a laugh. "That's the way I like to hear you talk, Tony," he said. He waited a long time and now his voice was panting. "Makes me think I didn't do such a bad job raising you." There was a lump in Tony's throat and he didn't answer. Ridkey's voice was weaker now. "Can you hear me, Tony?"

"Sure, I can hear you."

"You're damn good with a gun, Tony. Best I ever seen."

"I had a good teacher," Tony said. The tears were hot against his eyes now and he was getting weak. He wanted to get out of here. Get into the air.

"Tony?" Ridkey's voice was barely audible.

"Yeah?" Tony was gritting his teeth.

"Maybe I was wrong about a man finding a woman."

(Please continue on page 97)

TRY A LEAD PILL!

Old Doc Hayes had a bad case of gun-trouble until he wrote his own prescription—with red-hot lead.

By
ROBERT L. TRIMNELL

● ● ●

THERE was a worried frown on Doc Hayes' face that day. Not just from things like the Widow Jones' rheumatism and John Talbot's imaginary illnesses. He took them in his stride. It was the letter, the one clutched in his soft, pink hand. It had him worried. And

then as he hurried down the boardwalk he heard a voice below out of the Royal Flush Saloon.

"Just call yourself a liar, Stranger."

Doc sighed. That was Brig Latham, who was about to manufacture some business for him in the saloon. A broken jaw was the best he could hope for. But know-



He pulled both triggers at once.

ing it was Brig, he might even have to fulfill his office of coroner.

He set down his black bag and adjusted the gold-rimmed glasses that perched on his fleshy nose. Then he straightened his shapeless black frock coat.

Doc sighed again. He had no hankering for the business Brig Latham was about to provide. With that letter in his hand, Doc had been hoping things would stay the way they were. Fine weather and clear, which meant few miners falling down pit-holes, and cowhands having little trouble conducting an ordinary spring roundup.

"I already said what kind of polecat you are." It was a quiet voice, and one that Doc had never heard before. Nothing hysterical in it. Just a man making a clean, bold statement. But Doc figured it was one that was going to make a lot of work for him. He pushed through the batwings.

The hulking form of Brig Latham was in front of the bar. He eyed the man before him with cold, wolfish eyes.

The stranger was about a foot shorter. He wasn't wide, but not lean, either. His shoulders were bunches of muscle set just a little out from his neck. A mug of beer was cradled in his hands, and the way his arms were set reminded Doc of a pair of pistons, about to start work. He was young, maybe twenty-three, with a rock-like chin and blue eyes that were sparkling with anger.

He lifted the mug of beer to his mouth, took a swallow out of it, staring at Latham over the edge of the mug. Doc tensed himself, for he knew Brig. He didn't need to be told about the long arm that drove forward and the hairy fist that crashed into the small stranger's belly.

Doc sighed and readied to open his black bag. But it didn't go that way. The stranger was backing as the fist rode toward him, and the killing blow tapped harmlessly into a tautened stomach. He slammed the mug down on the bar. A left arm slashed out. Latham ducked it. Then a right came out of nowhere and exploded off the big man's jaw.

Latham staggered back, stunned by the blow. The stranger didn't attack. He picked up his mug and took another sip of beer.

Somebody whispered to Doc, "He said he didn't like gunslicks—Brig for instance."

Latham let out a roar like a wounded bull and flung himself forward, fists flailing.

The stranger just stood his ground, ducked a furious right, then gave Latham the same as before. A feint with the left that the big man flung away from, frantically. Then a right that came up like lightning.

Brig took it on the chin, but this time he didn't stop. He flailed on in. The stranger gave a little ground. Suddenly Doc saw his booted right foot brace against the floor. The man was leaning forward and his right fist climbed up into Latham's face.

It crunched bone. Then the smaller man charged, fists chugging with relentless crashes into the big man's face. They never swerved from the target. Helpless, Brig staggered back to the batwings, reeling under the flurry of blows. Then the stranger gathered himself into a tight knot, exploded. His fist landed once more on Latham's chin. And the big man crashed backward, through the batwings. There was dead silence in the room as the heavy body thumped down on the boardwalk and lay still.

Doc sighed, pushed past the stranger and went out to stand over the fallen man. He reached down and felt the bones of his face. Nothing broken. He turned back into the saloon, went over to a table and sat down. He glanced once at the bar. The stranger was sipping calmly at his beer.

Doc opened the letter in his hand. He murmured "Thanks" as the bartender sat a bottle down on the table with a glass hung on top of it. Automatically Doc poured a half-inch of whiskey in the bottom of the glass while he scanned the letter. It didn't take him very long to read it.

Dear Doc Hayes, you danged old pill-roller! My son Jeff is headin' your way. Will you pay old damages for stuff he wrecks?

Joe Falsom.

Doc had known old Joe for years. He used to practice medicine up in the plains country, and he knew Joe Falsom for the

richest rancher, the orneriest fighter, and the proudest man he had ever run into. Which meant that his son, Jeff, was likely a heller. Of course, Doc would pay any damages the youngster might cause if he hit Tres Picos. Old Joe would pay him back. But he hated to be responsible for any youngster who was anything like Joe Falsom.

Suddenly Doc sat bolt upright in his chair. He grabbed the glass and drained it. The stranger! He looked over at him, and he didn't like what he saw. Those shoulders, bunched up like that! And the jaw! The fellow was talking companiably to a couple of cowhands, rolling a cigarette. With his arms cocked up against his chest. Doc groaned. Too many times had he seen Joe Falsom roll a curly.

He caught the youngster's eye and waved a pudgy hand at him. Hands still cocked up, the stranger came over, licking his cigarette closed. With resignation in his voice, Doc said, "Your name Jeff Falsom?"

He licked the cigarette closed, gave it a twist, and lit it. "Uh-huh."

"Mind sitting down here?"

THE youngster sat, lighting his cigarette. Doc pushed the broad-brimmed range hat back on his head and smoothed the silver-gray hair back. "I got a letter from your dad. I knew him when you were too young to climb on a hoss."

Falsom pointed the cigarette at him. "Get this straight. I left home because I'm damn tired of the old man treatin' me like I wear three corner pants. I'm on my own, see?"

Doc nodded. "It's just if you want anything, or get in trouble, let me know."

The youngster snorted, as if to say that a fat, middle aged medico wouldn't be much help.

"Reckon you're Doc Hayes," he said. "Heard the old man talk about you. Well, I'm tired of just bein' Joe Falsom's son, Jeff. I'm going to make my own way. That's why I came here. They say it's an up and comin' town, what with two mines nearby and bein' the shoppin' center for a lot of ranches." He pushed to his feet, then reached a sturdy hand out to grip Doc's. He grinned, and it was the wide, white-toothed grin that Doc remembered

on Joe Falsom. "Pleased to meet you, because I've heard you're a hell of a fine man. But get this straight. I'm on my own, see?"

He turned back to the bar and ordered a drink. Doc shook his head, poured a little more whiskey and drank it. Then he remembered the Widow Jones's rheumatism. He pushed his round bulk up out of the chair and out through the batwings.

He almost knocked Sheriff Matt Jackson down. The sheriff was a burly fellow, so he didn't quite make it. Matt pushed away from him, grinned. He was a little younger than Doc, with graying hair and well-tended gray mustaches. As usual, the silver star on his cowhide vest glittered like a mirror.

"Matt, you got to start watchin' where you go," Doc told the sheriff. "Look like you're all tied up with worry."

"Wouldn't say that, Doc," Jackson brushed his mustaches carefully. "Course, as you know, the stage robberies aren't helpin' too much. The stage company and the mines swing a lot of votes. I'm like as not to lose the next election if things aren't cleared up."

Doc nodded. Somebody in the county had been taking occasional stabs at the gold shipments from the mines.

"How's your daughter?" Matt Jackson asked. He wasn't one to let his own troubles stand in the way of civility.

"Purtier'n ever," Doc said. He smiled. Helen always brightened him up, even when somebody just mentioned her. "Figure she's bakin' today. If you beat the young bucks over that hang around there, you might get a slab of apple pie. Usual thing, I have to hurry to get some myself." He grumbled a little. "Seems the younguns nowadays got nothin' to do but hang around purty gals and eat pie." He shook his head.

The sheriff grinned. "'Bout three o'clock I'm goin' to clear your house of younguns, if I have to chase Helen off with 'em. That pie ain't worth a cent under five dollars a slab." He shoved on into the saloon. "See you then, Doc."

Doc remembered the Widow Jones's rheumatism. With a sigh he continued on down the boardwalk.

Doc Hayes beat the sheriff to the house that afternoon. In fact, it seemed that he

also beat the cowhands and other young wolves of the town that hung around there. He sighed with contentment. His round figure was not the sign of laziness, for he rode a lot and walked a lot, which was more than a lot of the others around town could say. But Doc loved food, and no matter how much exercise he got, food usually won by the score of another loop in his belt.

He smelled fresh coffee in the kitchen, and the crusty odor of fresh pies. Grinning, he hurried through to the kitchen and burst through the doorway. Then suddenly his grin froze.

Sitting with his feet on the table, munching a half a pie between gulps of coffee was young Jeff Falsom! For a moment Doc thought that Helen couldn't be around. Never had anyone put his feet on the kitchen table. But Helen was sitting there with him, listening to his talk.

"Oh, Dad! Mr. Falsom came in to see you, and so—" She stopped. But Doc saw the sparkles in her usually gray eyes, and the nervous smile.

Jeff pushed his feet off the table and stood up. Which showed, Doc thought, that old Joe hadn't raised him to be a complete fool.

"Have some coffee, Doc. And pie. We got plenty since that gang of wolves isn't hangin' around."

Doc supplied himself with food and coffee. "And why aren't they around?"

Helen said, "Why, I don't know, Dad. Jeff came in here looking for you, and we got to talking. We heard quite a bunch of them come up on the front porch. Jeff went out and talked to them, and all of a sudden they left. What was it they said, Jeff? They decided they weren't very hungry?"

Jeff wouldn't meet the doctor's eyes. Doc knew why they had left. He had seen several good reasons for people leaving Jeff Falsom alone. And worked out on a bigger man than any of the coffee and pie wolves. And Doc glanced at Helen's blonde hair and gray eyes, and knew why Jeff had decided there was no more than enough pie for two.

"I came to ask you a favor, Doc." The sound of Jeff's voice surprised the medico. It was a long way from the arrogant son of Joe Falsom that Doc had figured him

for. Doc waited. Jeff Falsom very plainly was being influenced by a woman, whether he knew it or not.

"I was talkin' to the mine agent here in town. Name of John Talbot. He offered me a job haulin' gold here from the mine and takin' payrolls up there. Only thing, I'd need somebody to stand bond for me. Now according to that letter from dad, he'll stand in back of any money I cost you. Not that you'll need it. But I just thought I'd mention it. That's why I came over here this afternoon."

DOC squinted his eyes suspiciously and sank his teeth into a piece of pie. For a moment he didn't think, just tasted. Then he thought. Why the devil did Jeff Falsom want to handle gold and payrolls? There were plenty of jobs for a youngster with his drive and fight. This was one of the few where he'd have to depend on his father to get started. But that didn't really matter to Doc. After all, old Joe Falsom would back it. And that was enough for him.

"Why yes, I'll go bond for you, Jeff." He was still puzzled. He tried to make light of it. "Anybody that er—persuades those wolves to leave the pies alone can get my bond."

Shortly after, the youngster left. The door was hardly closed when Sheriff Matt Jackson came in. Without ceremony he cut into a pie and poured himself some coffee. He sat down while Helen busied herself with taking a cake out of the oven. Doc glanced at the cake. To his practiced eye it didn't look so good. And that was plenty unusual, when Helen made cakes. He caught her eye, and saw the blush in her cheek, and the way she looked aside so suddenly. Doc grinned. It seemed that Joe Falsom's son was a little more than she could handle without at least burning a cake.

"What happened to the wolves?" the sheriff said. "I saw young Bill Harrison sportin' a brand-new black eye. Didn't get mad at him, did you, Helen? Young pup doesn't mean no harm."

Helen gasped and almost dropped the cake. "Jeff—told me that Bill fell getting off—his—horse."

The sheriff glanced at Doc Hayes. They both understood. It happened that Bill

Harrison hadn't fallen off his horse since he was five years old.

"Falsom's going to work as payroll and gold guard," Doc said.

The sheriff paused in gulping his coffee. "Shame. He'll have to learn you can't fight it out with a bullet from the back-trail. And he may learn too late. His kind often does. Besides, he's made a bad enemy of Brig Latham."

Doc straightened with a jerk. "You aren't sayin' that Brig's connected with the gold shipment robberies?"

The sheriff eyed him. "No. How'd you get that idea, Doc?" He pulled makings from his pocket and began twisting a quiry. "But now you mention it, I wouldn't say that those men Brig and his partner Baldy Kants got out at their ranch would take any beauty contests. And would you say they's any need for seven men on maybe six hundred head of cattle?"

Doc pushed the glasses down on his nose and stared at the sheriff over them. "Maybe we shouldn't say that, Matt. Latham and Kants often take trail herds to the railhead, and they pick up a good bunch of cash that way. No, I believe seven men pay their way on that spread." He thought that over a minute. "But then the whole bunch of them sees a lot of the Royal Flush, as well as every other saloon in town."

The sheriff lit his quiry and tilted his chair back. "Reckon we'll have to wait and see, Doc. But I b'lieve I'll keep an eye on Latham."

Doc didn't see much of the man he had bonded for a couple of days. He found that Jeff was handling payrolls to both Blue Salt and Injun Creek mines, riding the regular daily stages that went to both points. Naturally, he hadn't had any trouble. The miners were paid weekly, and old John Talbot, the agent, had ways of marking the bills. The holdups had occurred when gold was being carried out.

Doc went down to the mine agent's office, to leave some sugar pills that old Talbot believed would cure his arthritis. Doc had a lot of confidence in sugar pills, as long as the colors were shiny and pretty. That is, when the disease was like the one old Talbot had. Imaginary. Since the healing actions of the pills were imaginary too, they helped quite a bit. Doc al-

ways carried a few bottles of sugar pills among the dozens of bottles in his black bag.

"How's Jeff Falsom makin' out, John?"

Old Talbot shrugged. "Kind of ornery sort." He grinned, clutched his right leg. "That misery is back down here in my laig, Doc."

Doc sighed. He'd known the agent for too long to be taken in by his afflictions. But he knew that Talbot would be terribly hurt if his sickness wasn't taken seriously.

"Shootin' pains, John?"

The agent wiped the sweat of pain off his forehead. "They just seem to boil up in my laig, and shoot little sparks off."

Suddenly the screech of stage brakes clashed into the office, and with it the pounding of hoofs. Old Talbot cursed under his breath. "Warned that driver to come in town easy-like!" Then he pushed to his feet. No driver came in that fast just for the fun of it. They hurried to the door together.

A knot of people had formed already, helping Falsom hand a limp form down from the top of the stage. They laid the man on the boardwalk, and Doc ran out and bent over him, opening his bag. Bullet wounds. Shoulder and side.

"Tried to shoot us off the seat," Jeff said. His voice was calm. Doc stood up from the wounded man. Falsom was rolling a cigarette with his arms cocked up close to his chest. "I might have got one. I dunno. When Andy got hit I had to take the reins. They didn't try to block us and I managed to outrun 'em. I had a powerful lot of dust in my favor. Made shootin' hard for them."

Doc heard more about it later, when they got the wounded driver down to his office. But it added up to a half-dozen masked riders, too far away to be identified. Matt Jackson drifted down to the office, watched Doc dig lead out of the injured man.

"Been talkin' to Falsom," he told Doc. "Says he didn't see who they were."

Scalpel in hand, Doc turned and stared at the sheriff. "The way you said that, Matt. You mean—"

Jackson lit a cigarette, stared over the flame at Doc. "I like the kid, you know that. But he isn't much of a hand at lying. There's something he won't tell." He flipped the match away. "I'm going to



start timing the stages. If one is late after this, I'm going out there, Doc."

And maybe, Doc thought, maybe he would be too late.

HE WAS tired the next evening when he went into the Royal Flush for a drink. But he didn't stay long in the saloon. But before he left he saw Jeff Falsom was talking earnestly with two men. One, Doc saw immediately was Brig

Latham. And the other was Baldy Kants.

A couple days later a miner fell into the Blue Run shaft and Doc had to run out to the mine. He left his borrowed horse at a livery stable and decided to ride back on the stage. He whistled when he saw the size of the shipment that Jeff and a couple of mine guards loaded on the coach.

He rode up on the box with Jeff and old Lyde Hawks, the driver. "Might be dangerous up here, Doc," Jeff muttered.

"Lonely inside, with no other passengers." Doc settled down the seat beside Hawks, black bag on his lap. For one thing, he had some suspicions, and figured he could keep an eye on things better from the top of the coach. If Jeff Falsom was going to turn owlhoot, he intended to have a word to say about it. He knew how Helen felt about the gold guard. And Old Joe Falsom had asked him to watch out for Jeff. He'd do a lot for both of them. Doc set his lips in a tight line. He wished he had a gun.

Jeff perched on some baggage behind. He sat easily as the coach rolled out of the mine camp and into the rough mountain road. Doc had all he could do to cling to the top of the heaving stage. But still he kept an eye peeled, glancing nervously at every tree and rock outcropping. When they passed the half-way mark to Tres Picos he felt better.

Then the other Colt caught his eye. Jeff was sitting cross-legged, and between his legs lay a Colt, besides the one buckled at his waist.

"Figurin' on trouble, Jeff?"

"Always got to be ready, Doc."

Doc moved back next to him. "Jeff, between you and me, well—I haven't told this to anybody, but I saw you talkin' to Brig Latham and Baldy Kants the other day. In the Royal Flush. I don't know, Jeff, but I don't think they're exactly the best—er, companions a fellow could have."

Jeff looked at him hard. "Maybe they aren't."

Doc stared back at the youngster. "I hope you know what you're up against with their kind, Jeff."

"I think I know."

Doc turned back and faced ahead. Had Jeff made a deal with Latham and Kants? But maybe they had nothing to do with the stage robberies anyway. Maybe Jeff was just trying to ease some enemies out of the way. And maybe—maybe Jeff had made a deal with the stage robbers. Doc's head was sunken on his chest, wondering.

It came so suddenly. One minute they had been riding at an easy trot. The next Lyde Hawks was sawing in on the reins, yanking the brake. The road ahead was strewed with huge boulders. Behind the rocks, four horsemen, each with a bandana

reaching up to his eyes, swung into view. Doc gripped his little black bag, saw that Lyde was too busy with the mules to do anything, that the driver and Doc himself were blocking Jeff's guns. He saw the guns in the hands of the four men, and heard their yells to stop.

"Damn!" shouted Hawks. Suddenly he had the mules almost down on their rumps. And he was grabbing up the sawed-off shotgun across his lap. A rifle barked, and the old driver yelled in pain. But he swung the shotgun up. A six-gun slug and another rifle bullet slammed into him. Blood running down his chest, he jammed the stock of the shotgun against his shoulder. Then he pulled both triggers at once.

The nearest owlhoot was blown clear off his horse. The one next to him yelled, grabbed at a buckshot-punctured shoulder, reeled and tumbled off his horse. But the old driver was finished. He collapsed in his seat.

Doc saw Jeff swing into action. The Colt that had been lying in his lap blasted twice, drilled two holes in an owlhoot mask. Then a rifle cracked, and Jeff slumped forward on his face. It was from behind. Doc glanced around. Two riders wheeled to a stop, smoke whirling out of their rifles.

"Don't move, Fatty," growled one of them. The voice wore a thin attempt at disguise.

"I'm unarmed," Doc said. For the first time in years he wished he had a gun. He would rather have gone down shooting. But as a man who had no enemies, he'd never seen a reason why he should carry one. He saw it now. He moved over beside Jeff. A bullet had ripped along his scalp. It seemed to be the only wound. It had laid the youngster unconscious, but not badly hurt. It was then that Doc noticed that a gunslug had hit his bag. A hole was drilled through the bottom. He opened it. The slug had burned through a whole row of pill bottles, smashing every one to bits.

"Damn you," one of the masked men said, "get down here and patch up this man's shoulder." He clicked the hammer on his sixgun suggestively.

Doc hurried down. The man Lyde Hawks had hit directly was dead, his chest

full of buckshot. The one Jeff shot was finished too. The other he found had a bunch of buckshot in his shoulder and chest. Doc shook his head. He glanced up at the seat. Lyde was gone, but he had gone out honestly, taking two men down with him.

"I can't operate on this man in the road," he said. His voice choked as he said it. The bandana was not covering the wounded man's face too well, and his hat had fallen off. It was Baldy Kants.

The stage robbers had a hurried consultation. "You can go to a line cabin near here with us," one told him. Then the biggest man of the lot growled out to another, "Finish off that guard. The traitor!" he growled.

That hit Doc hard. It seemed that Jeff had really made a deal with them. But he wasn't going to let them kill the youngster.

"If you kill that guard, this man here will die. There's no other doctor for eighty miles, and I'll finish this man off with a scalpel, even if you kill me for it." He was surprised at the iron in his own voice. But he thought, Helen seems to think a lot of that youngster. And he wasn't going to have his daughter's heart broken.

"All right," growled the big owlhoot. "He'll go to the line cabin with us." They brought extra horses around. After Doc had stopped Baldy's wound up, they hustled him on a horse. They laid Jeff over the back of another and piled bags of gold on the rest. In a few minutes the caravan was headed away from the road.

Doc knew the country they were in. That is, he knew it was the kind of rocky country that an army could pass over

without leaving a track. He rode with his black bag across the pommel, gloomily eyeing his captors. Suddenly an idea passed through his mind, and he almost grinned. True, they would leave no trail through the rocky country. But if a man were careful—

JEFF was conscious when they reached the shack. The owlhoots made him carry the wounded Baldy Kants into the shack. Doc heard somebody mutter. "I'd say let Baldy die, only he's too well known in town. If he don't show up, somebody there's goin' to get suspicious." And then Doc knew that the big man was Brig Latham. He knew, too, that Brig would never let him go, to tell what he knew. Or Jeff, for that matter. As soon as Baldy was out of danger, there'd be a couple of quick shots in their backs. Doc knew that. And he wished he knew how to handle a gun, so that he could go down fighting.

He spent an hour picking buckshot out of Baldy Kants. The owlhoots had put them in one of the two rooms, closed the door and locked it. There was no window. The door had huge leather hinges and on the other side of it a man sat with a cocked gun, while the other two counted up their loot.

Jeff sat on the edge of the bed, holding his head in his hands. When Doc finished with Baldy, dressed the wounds, he sat down beside Jeff.

"From the way things are goin', Jeff, it looks like you were plannin' to side these owlhoots."

Jeff shook his head. "No. But I was awful greedy, Doc. I thought I spotted Brig Latham the other day, when they tried to hold us up. So I told him, in the



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Royal Flush the day you saw me there. I said I wanted a cut. Mostly I just wanted to be sure it was him. He admitted it then."

"Why in blazes didn't you tell Matt Jackson?"

"Greedy." The younger man looked up, and there was pain in his eyes. "I wanted the whole reward on those critters myself. I was going to figure a way to corral them. I acted like I was sidin' them to hold them off the gold shipments for a while. But then they didn't hold off, and Lyde Hawks started shootin' at 'em."

Doc sighed. "I'd never think of playin' bounty hunter myself. But then, I'm not built for it." He looked over Jeff's hard-knit body.

Suddenly there was a shuffling of feet, scraping of chairs in the other room. And outside, the approaching clatter of a pony's hoofs on rock.

"That'll be the sheriff," Doc said. "Bet those boys out there are awful surprised that he's found their hideaway." He glanced at Baldy Kants. The man was sleeping off the effects of his wounds. Doc reached in his little black bag and took out a razor-sharp scalpel. He went over to the door. The heavy leather hinges were on the other side. He slid the scalpel through the space between door-jamb and door and began work. His fingers moved with an experienced surgeon's sureness and ease. He didn't cut through, just slashed until each hinge had only a paper-thickness of leather remaining on the other side. Then he pushed to his feet, turned to Jeff.

"When things start you can bust through the door, Jeff. You got the fast fists. I've done about all I can do."

There was a shout outside. "Open in the name of the law!"

A gun roared out of the next room. A rifle bullet whistled back in, in answer.

"That's Matt Jackson out there," Jeff breathed. Then he readied himself. He got back against the farthest wall, crouched down. The rifle whanged twice, and the owlhoot blasts lead out through the windows. Then Jeff lunged.

Doc saw him hit the door like a bull on the loose. It slammed down before him, and he kept going. Doc hurried his fat body forward, over the flattened door. He

saw Jeff dive into a cursing owlhoot, slam the man over into big Brig Latham.

The third man turned from the window, raised his rifle to club the gold guard. Doc moved into action. He grabbed the man's shoulder, yanked him back and hooked a fat arm around his neck. Then he laid the blade of the scalpel against his jugular vein.

"Just 'drop the rifle," Doc murmured. "I'll slit you from ear to ear if you don't. It won't hurt much, this scalpel is so sharp." He pricked the skin of the man's throat, and the rifle dropped.

Doc saw Jeff grab the gun of the man he had been grappling with, slam it into his forehead. He thumbed hammer as he brought it away. Brig Latham was swinging his own six into position. They were only three feet apart. The fury with which Jeff moved gave him the fraction of a second he needed. His gun lashed flame into Latham's chest as the owlhoot was thumbing hammer. Brig staggered back, crashed into the wall and went down.

"Come on in, Matt," Doc yelled. He let go of the owlhoot he was holding, and Jeff leveled his Colt at the man. His arms climbed as he backed against the wall.

Doc let his breath woosh out. "Got your fill of bounty huntin', Jeff?"

The younger man grinned. "I wanted to hunt bounty so bad I even asked you to sign my bond for this gold guard job. But I reckon I've had enough. Say, you're a handy man with a scalpel."

Doc smiled at him. "My profession, Jeff." But he had been fighting for something. His daughter's happiness, he figured. Besides a chance to show Jeff Falsom that there were things more important than getting rich in a hurry.

Matt Jackson burst in then. He surveyed the carnage and nodded. "Smart trick, Doc, leavin' that nice trail of colored pills."

"Wasn't anythin', Matt. They blew a hole in my bag, and the pills just started dribblin' out by themselves. Right useful things, sugar pills. Cured old John Talbot of his arthritis and—"

He stopped when he saw the respect in Jeff Falsom's eyes. Jeff would plague him for advice the rest of his life. Well, Doc thought, it was the least one could do for a son-in-law.

**The Kid knew that prize-fighting wasn't his line—until the crowd
rang the starting gong.**



THE world whirled in one direction; the floor spun violently. The noise of the crowd was a roaring that seemed to reel close, then to fling back until it was like a far, faint whispering. Men were yelling for him to get up. Through all that, sounding like the slow-clanging of a bell, the Buckaroo Kid from Montana heard the voice above him, counting with deadly seriousness:

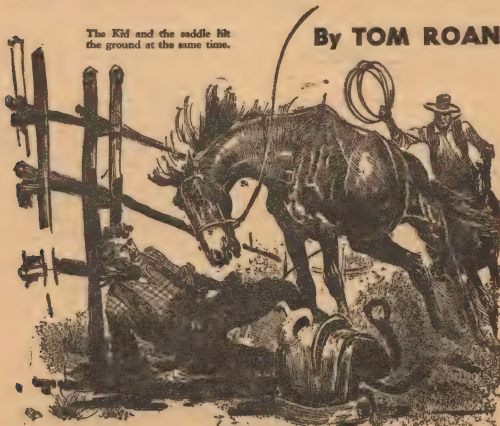
"... Four! ... Five! ... Six! ... Seven!"

He came up then, hands clearing the floor, everything still a cloud around him. Through the fog of it he saw the big, thick and wide-shouldered figure in dead-black trunks closing in on him again, rusty mop of hair down, on his face the smile of a tiger. Somehow the Kid made him miss, fell sprawling into him, and clenched with

THE LEATHER PUNCHER

The Kid and the saddle hit
the ground at the same time.

By **TOM ROAN**



a rabbit punch. A second later the short, bald referee was between them.

"Break!" he snapped. "Break clean!"

The bell sounded as they fell apart. Groggily the Kid turned and staggered to his corner. Hands grabbed him, somebody thrust a stool under him, the bright Wyoming sun again poured down in all its mid-August afternoon fury. In his ear a raucous voice whispered, "You're doin' all right, Kid."

"Sure, I'm doing fine." He tried to smile out of one side of his mouth as a man spilled ice water on his mop of curly brown hair and let it go running in streams down his boyish face and broad chest. "I'm hitting the floor everytime he hits me."

"Keep putting out that right and hold him off. Don't move in close enough to slug it out with him. The Tiger'll beat you to death if you do. Just keep away and keep driving—with that right."

It was the reverse of what they had told him during the two years he had had a chance to leave the old rangeland up in Montana and go to school. But this Mr. Sol Kelly seemed to know what he was talking about. He had managed many fighters. He was long, lean and dark, a man who could talk another into almost anything.

Sol Kelly had talked him into this, for the Buckaroo Kid had never wanted to be a ring fighter. He had come south only five days ago to enter the riding and roping contests here in Poison Oak—a yearly event called Pioneer Week. Jumped for a fight in a saloon the first night in town, he had had to hit two men. After leaving them unconscious on the floor behind him by straight rights to their jaws, Sol Kelly had been the first man to grab his arm and shake his hand. Thoughts of it being a rank frame-up inside had never once occurred to him. Now he was beginning to realize that they were making easy meat out of him.

He had been hired to box six rounds as a work-out for Tiger Johnson. The Tiger was to fight a professional in the morning of the last day of Frontier Week, and this supposed boxing match had been only to whet the appetite of the crowds and make them eager for the real fight with the Tiger pitted against a man called

Cyclone McGee. Men would pay real money to see that fight up here on this high flat above the head of the town.

"Fourth's coming up, only two to go after that." Kelly's voice was back, whispering sweetly in his ear. The Kid nodded. "Remember what I told you. Keep playing him with that right."

Playing him with that right! The Buckaroo Kid's head was clear by this time. Playing that right had been the reason he had been twice knocked to the floor in the first, three times in the second. The most he could get here would be a knock-out, and then the punishment would be over, and the hardest fifty dollars he had ever earned in his pocket.

Gong!

He came out well enough, Kelly giving him a little push. The Tiger rushed, that mean killer-light in his eyes, the scarred face, crooked nose and cauliflower ears.

The Kid sparred, keeping his right shoulder back, holding up on that right hand. The Tiger tagged him with a long-looping left jab to the mouth and nose, greedily after the blood. He swung in then with a right hook that grazed the Kid's head, dancing him back, following him, leering and smirking.

"Come in a' fight!" he hissed. "Don't run away!"

The Kid kept his mind on his business. One thing he had heard was to never get mad in the ring. He held his temper when the crowd started booing. This was no boxing match and he knew it now.

The action was suddenly speeded up with the Tiger almost cornering him. The Kid rocked in, everything tight, face covered behind his gloves. Suddenly he was getting in that right, sending it smashing hard to the point of the chin, then reeling in, hooking a left to the jaw, then another right, another left, and a long right that grazed the chin and kept the Tiger going back and back. The crowd began to boo the Tiger now for the first time. At the bell several people close to the ring were laughing.

"I told you to keep playing that right." There was a mean grate to Sol Kelly's tone when the Kid was back on the stool, head still clear. "That was a hell of a round!"

"But I stayed up that time!" The Kid

tried to grin. "Not down—as before." "Get your saddle horse and just keep going," leered Kelly, "if it's going to be anything like that in the fifth."

"I can hit him, and I know it now."

"He'll kill you, you fool!" Kelly snarled, mad as a hornet for some reason. "Keep going with that right. There's the bell!"

He went out faster, meeting the Tiger just beyond the center of the ring. They fell into it like wood-choppers, hammering and battering away, the crowd beginning to roar. The Tiger was a mad-man now, breath whistling through his nostrils. The Kid caught him with a right, then a left, and suddenly he found himself going back and down to one knee. There for just a second, he came up and leaped away, getting himself set again with the Tiger following him.

THE Tiger got it now, a left feint to the chin, then a smashing right uppercut that again found his chin, this time with the Kid's fullweight behind it. Now the Tiger was going back, floundering. He went down, hard on his right shoulder, and came up like bouncing rubber, and in his eyes showed a near-dying urge to make the kill a fast one.

But the Kid was smarter now. He was close-knit again, keeping his arms up and in, watching the Tiger's eyes and feet. They went into a flurry, then the Kid was away again, the Tiger following, snarling.

It was over suddenly. The Kid went down twice to one knee. He was rocking on his feet when he came up the second time, the Tiger boring in, landing rights and lefts, driving the Kid back to

the ropes. It looked like the kill was coming up, and it was there that the Kid fooled him.

Again there was that close-in feint of the left, the right getting through, landing so solidly it seemed to shake the ring. The Tiger went back for a step, trying to cover. But with a sudden crash Tiger Johnson was down, flat on his face on the floor, the crowd roaring, hooting and yelling its head off for the Buckaroo Kid.

"... Eight! ... Nine! ... Ten!"

The count had been long, the Kid standing there in a neutral corner, hands and arms on the ropes, the crowd strangely still now, the hot sun beating down, the Tiger still on the floor...

Back in the tent used as dressing rooms the Kid heard the roar of the crowd. He had had only one second besides Kelly—a little, squint-eyed, twisted-faced wart of a man called Philly Joe. Philly Joe sat on a stool and watched him as he changed back to cowboy clothes.

"They don't like it out there, Kid." Philly Joe was curling a cigarette with jerky hands. "You went outa bounds an' upset the applecart. Now maybe you'll have to fight Cyclone McGee."

"I'm not fighting anybody else." The Kid was grim. "Tomorrow I'm going into the riding contest, and from now on it's horses for me."

"Not if Sol Kelly says you're not." There was a hard, almost steady dark light in Philly Joe's eyes. "You bit off a lot when you hit his string. Maybe he'll come to like you."

"What are you talking about?" Kelly came in now. "Don't go wiseing up this yokel. We think he's broke the Tiger's jaw. And I hired you to box, not fight!"



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He was certainly after the Kid now.

"And," cut in the Kid, "that's what I thought I was going to do. I went in there instead and got a beating for three rounds with you telling me to do the wrong thing all the time. I'm going back to horses, and now," he held out his hand, "I'd like to have my fifty bucks. I think I've earned it."

"You'll earn a good sight more'n this before I'm done!" Reluctantly, Kelly handed over the money. "I'll see to that."

Tiger Johnson and his seconds, followed by a doctor, were trailing into the next room of the tent. The Kid pocketed his money and moved on out.

Everybody seemed to know him when he walked down the street, and headed for the public stables on the lower east side of it where he had left his tall bay.

Many of the men here had either won or lost money on the fight, but it made little difference either way. Here was a Westerner who had come through, and from the start they had been on his side.

"Yuh done 'er, boy," a grizzled old cowman came up, clamping a rope-twisted hand on his shoulder. "That's all that counts. We thought yuh was a goner three or four times up there. How long yuh been doin' this fightin'?"

"It was my first one—and my last. I'm riding tomorrow."

"Stick to ridin'." The old hand tightened. "None of us are wild about that eastern crowd. Don't like their looks. Bob Hallday don't, an' Bob's sheriff." He jerked his head toward the old jail at the foot of the street just across the wagon bridge spanning the creek. "Only 'bout nine of 'em hang together in the open-like, but they say there's more—sorter egger-uppers playin' the crowds, maybe. I ain't right smart when it comes to all them things. But I'll say agin I don't like their looks, 'specially that Mr. Kelly fella."

It was like that with others, but the Kid kept his mouth shut. After seeing that his horse had been fed and watered he headed for the carnival, hoping to lose himself in the crowds, wanting to hear no more about Tiger Johnson. But Poison Oak was a small place after all and everyone kept following him until he headed back to the little Owl Hotel. He

was in the room less than a minute before Sol Kelly opened the door and walked in, with Philly Joe.

"The Tiger's jaw's broke," he snarled.

"That was a hell of a lick that you hit him. Now, boy, you're going to fight Cyclone McGee. Hold it!" He threw up his hands. "Really fight, I mean. I'm turning you loose and letting you go after 'im. And don't say you won't. There's big money in fighting."

"Mr. Kelly," the Kid was looking at him steadily, "horses and cattle are my dish, not fighting. I'm sticking to them."

"I'm paying a hundred bucks for the next one, Kid!"

"And I wouldn't care if it was a thousand!" ripped back the Kid. "I really never fought anybody before. In school it was boxing. It was rare when anybody ever got a bop on the nose hard enough to make it bleed. Tomorrow I'm riding contest—"

"Listen, Mister Buckaroo!" In Kelly's right hand now was a mean little automatic pistol, so small a man could almost hide it in a vest pocket. "When I want things I want 'em—an' pay for 'em." His tone had become low, menacing. "You're a drawing card now among these yokels out here. They'll bet their ears off on you. That means you're going to fight the Cyclone."

"And I'll make it even better." He added that after a second's pause to let the first take full effect. "I'll make it—well, two hundred! Think of that, *two hundred* dollars for getting in there and going ten rounds with Cyclone McGee. But don't try to run out on us." He stepped close, pointing the muzzle of the little automatic at the Kid's chest. "Somebody'll be watching every move you make. If you try a run-out the buzzards'll pick your bones before you get back to Montana. That's all I've got to say."

He turned on his heel and walked out, Philly Joe scooting along at his heels. When they were gone the Buckaroo Kid grinned, then turned to a big pair of saddle bags at the foot of the bed. Still smiling, he pulled out a long silver-mounted Colt. A minute later he had buckled a heavy old cartridge belt around him, the Colt swinging at his hip. He stalked out of the room.

BANDS played rousingly the next afternoon. The Pioneer Week Rodeo was on, the thing people had come to see. On the west side of the arena were the chutes and pens, the judges' stand looming high above the bronc chute. As the bands died away for a few moments an announcer's voice blared through a yard-long megaphone:

"The Buckaroo Kid aboard Skyrocket-et!"

He was already inside the chute, down in the saddle, the halter shank in his left hand, big gray hat in his right. In drawing Skyrocket's number the Kid had been lucky. Skyrocket was a good horse in the way bucking horses are rated. He was a fighter to the finish, a whirling, pitching, flying storm on two feet. Four alert herders and pick-up men were just outside the chute, their horses tensed with tight reins and sharp rowels pressed against their flanks.

"Let 'im ride." The Kid spoke, voice tight, face pale. Tension was always there when a man settled down in a saddle and was ready to go on a real fighting bronc. "We'll see how high he flies."

"Gates!"

They slammed back with the noise of two fast shots from guns. Like sudden lightning crashing from the shadows Skyrocket came out, a light-bay flash of splendid horseflesh bolting into the bright, white light and leaving the earth in his first flying jump, every foot off the ground.

It was lightning all the way as long as it lasted. The horse was like a cyclone possessed of a thousand devils. He went up high and came down hard, a lightning spin and a furious backfire, fence-row, sunfish, every move reaching for the sun. In the first five seconds it looked like he was about to throw a hula-han'—a straight-rolling pitch forward that would bring his head down to the ground and under, almost certain death to any rider unable to get clear of the saddle in time. With a yank on the halter shank the Kid sawed him out of that, riding him straight up, raking him in the shoulder at every jump, the foot swinging on back until the rowel of his spur kicked the saddle's cantle.

And then something snapped, and the

Buckaroo Kid was in the air, a yell of alarm lifting from other watching riders waiting their turn at the chute back there: *"He's off!" "His cinch busted!" "Get to 'im quick!"*

The Kid and the saddle hit the ground at the same time, pick-up riders and herders swirling around him. In a few seconds he had been swung up behind a rider, Skyrocket having turned back, wall-eyed and eager for the kill. He was a horse gone mad. In a rush the Kid was taken back to safety, one of the men bringing his saddle.

"What happened, boy?" A little, lean old man with a straggly gray beard and a star on his vest came from somewhere as the Kid squatted in the shade of the bronc chute, hastily examining his saddle. "If that thing hadn't come off yuh woulda rid square in on the today's saddle money. Lemme look at that saddle. I'm Bob Halliday, the sheriff, an' one of the judges to boot."

The Kid would not have said a word about what he had immediately discovered, but there was no way of stopping the law and one of the judges of the contests. In a couple of seconds Halliday was back on his feet, a hard glint in his pale old eyes.

"That was damn dirty!" he growled, glancing all around. "Somebody cut the strap on the cinch ring, leaving just enough leather to hold on tight 'til that hoss got to goin' good. If it was done just 'cause he was lucky enough to draw Skyrocket, then it ain't gonna do nobody any good. Fix that saddle, boy, an' tomorrow yuh get yoreself another crack at that same hoss."

It was another break for the Buckaroo Kid. Without a saddle he could only sit around and watch the rest of it. He was perched on a plank on top of the fence when Sol Kelly eased up behind him.

"A born prize fighter has no damned business breaking his bones in a yokel fair ground business like this, Kid."

"No?" The Kid turned and looked at him coldly. "Maybe you're right. I don't know, but there's one thing I do know. One of these days you're going to use that 'yokel' business just once too often—and break your jaw, Mr. Kelly."

"Maybe, maybe so," grinned Kelly.

"Anyway, Cyclone McGee will be in tomorrow on the afternoon train. After you look him over maybe you won't be afraid to fight him. You really don't look yellow, Kid."

The Kid slid down off the fence and moved away from him, but there was no way of getting rid of the others. At every place he tried to sit some member or two of that prize fight mob would come easing up beside him. Next to the last was Philly Joe, oozing up on the fence behind him.

"You can't get away from 'im, Kid. Sol Kelly never wants anything unless he gets it. But you wouldn't need to have any worry about McGee. The Tiger's whipped him three times in the past. Take 'im—an' beat his damn brains out!"

The Kid ignored him as if he was not there. Philly Joe talked on for a few minutes more, then slid away. In a few minutes Tiger Johnson was easing up on the fence in the same place. He spoke through his teeth:

"No hard feelin's, Kid." He tried to grin. "Can't talk well. Just wanta say ever'thing's all right. You licked me on the level. After that you needn't be afraid of Cyclone McGee. I can knock his ears down any day or night."

"I'm not afraid of anybody, Tiger." The Kid looked at him steadily. "Fighting's just not my way. I hate to hurt anybody. I hated to hurt you, but you were beating me to death. Go back and tell Kelly I'm not fighting his Cyclone McGee—not even Philly Joe."

"Too bad about your saddle, Kid." Johnson swung back down. "It's being talked all the way up in the grandstands. A lot of things can happen to a man. Some worse than that, I can tell you!"

THEY left him alone after that, and he saw the rest of the day's rodeo in peace. By the next morning his saddle had been repaired. The afternoon saw him riding straight into the day's saddle money on the flying, bounding and sawing back of Skyrocket—one of the toughest, meanest things he had ever tied leather aboard to ride.

"Yuh earned it, boy, an' I'm glad." Old Sheriff Bob Halliday counted out the two hundred dollars there in the sha-

dow of the bronc chute. "They say you're gonna fight that new fella comin'."

He clamped a hand on the old man's shoulder. "I'm no prize fighter. I'm a cowboy and a bronc rider."

"Just the same," scowled the sheriff, "that fella Kelly's goin' right on with the fight."

He saw the much-talked-about Cyclone McGee right after the afternoon train came whistling into town. Tiger Johnson was a big man, but McGee was bigger, his chest massive, swinging clubs for arms, great lumps of shoulders, hands like bunches of bananas. Cyclone McGee had the lurching walk of a giant bull-ape.

Leaning against a rain barrel on the opposite side of the street, the Kid watched McGee, Kelly and Philly Joe as they passed by. Kelly and McGee turned into the swinging doors of the Red Rock Saloon and Hotel. Philly Joe headed in at the side door evidently to take McGee's bags upstairs. Now old Bob Halliday eased up beside the Kid.

"So that was the big noise, huh?" He spoke from the side of his mouth. "Kelly's takin' 'im in the Red Rock to show 'im off. He's already puttin' up signs in ever' saloon an' eatin' place."

But he had something else on his mind. The Kid could see it, but he waited, knowing that it would come in time, and finally it was coming:

"Whether it's gonna be yuh are not, boy, I'd like to see somebody fight that fella. That ain't to be talked 'round. But I'd like to see that fight go 'on. You're the best drawin' card Kelly could get, an' yuh would shore pull the crowd—take ever'body off the street an' up yonder on that hill. Reckon you'll change yore mind? If, say now, I'd put up an extra hundred dollars to what Kelly pays yuh?"

"Sheriff, what are you driving at?" The Kid straightened and looked at him searchingly. "Come out with it!"

"Nope." The old man shook his head. "I'm trustin' yuh this far not to talk. But I've got hopes, strong hopes, that none of Mr. Kelly's fine plans will go astray. If yuh only stayed one or two rounds—well, the crowd would be on the hill. Yuh can trust me, Buckaroo Kid. Many another man has, an' Bob Halliday never let nobody down. Think it over, but

keep yore mouth shut—no loose talk."

He moved away, looking entirely unconcerned. The Kid continued to lean against the barrel, wondering what it was all about. Kelly came from somewhere, like a haunting ghost in his shadow.

"Cyclone's a good fellow at heart, Kid," he half-whispered. "Says I'm not paying you enough. All right. It'll be two hundred and fifty just before you enter the ring, and two hundred and fifty when you come out. That's money—and no mean horse whirling on you to try to kill you.

Again—in the warm sunlight of the last day of Pioneer Week—he sat on the same stool, in the same corner, about to do the very thing he had said he would never do. The crowd was jam-packed all around him inside the high-wired enclosure. Behind him were three burly bronc riders taking care of his clothes and his purse. Rolled in his clothing was his old Colt—just in case anything happened.

There was tension now, far more than climbing into a bronc chute and settling in a mean horse's saddle.

Waiting now for Cyclone McGee, he looked all around. Sheriff Bob Halliday had been in the crowd only a minute ago, but there was no sign of him now. The old man had come to be seen, it seemed, and had slipped away, losing himself in the crowd and getting back down in town. In a sudden roaring of the crowd, Kelly's caw-lie whispering fell on the Kid's right ear.

"Cyclone's coming. Just remember to go it easy for the first five rounds, after that cut loose. But make it good all the way. Take a fall or two to please the crowd. Cyclone will do the same if the chance comes and you're smart enough."

"Fake the first five—is that right?" "Sure!" Kelly rubbed his back nervously. "You catch on fast, Kid!"

He was giving them their money's worth right from the bell three or four minutes later. The Cyclone came out like a cyclone, an expert showman of the ring. Immediately he tagged the Kid with rights and lefts, took a right to the jaw, and went reeling and rocking back, looking as if he was about to fall and bringing a maddening roar from the crowd.

"I'll floor you now," he whispered just as the referee broke them. "Take a count of four."

The Kid took it, going down for the four, then coming up as the crowd roared its head off again. Like battering bulls they went at it, the Kid driving the Cyclone back, the Cyclone making a sudden switch of it and driving the Kid. Forty seconds before the bell the Kid landed a right, and the Cyclone went down to the joy of the crowd. He came up at seven, looking old, tired and battered, and then the voice, again a whisper:

"You're doin' it just right. I'll wait 'til the ninth to knock you cold. Keep it up."

The Kid went back to his stool at the bell, Kelly and Philly Joe pawing over him. Cold-faced and cold-sober, the Kid sat there, not listening to what Kelly was saying—listening for something else, knowing that it might come in the middle of the next round.

"Just don't make Cyclone mad. He'll kill you."

It was warning enough. The bell clanged. The Kid moved out, the crowd giving him a cheer. The second was speeded up. The Kid went down twice. Cyclone flopped over from a right upper-

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cut. When he came up the Kid caught him on the nose and mouth with a right cross. Cyclone looked mean as he walked back to corner at the bell.

BUT it was a game here and the Kid was playing it, learning something everytime he came out to meet that fighting machine. In the last of the fifth he started going to town. A short right got through, no longer than an eight-inch uppercut. Cyclone went back, hard-hit for the first time. He hit the ropes, bounced off, and came back really fighting, first hammering and battering, each blow enough to jar a man from head to heel. The Kid clenched, held on, Cyclone cursing him now for a double-crosser. The Kid knocked him sprawling just before the bell.

Now it was the sixth—and blood all the way. The Cyclone was older and knew more about fighting than the Kid could have known. He bounced the Kid all over the ring, battered him along the ropes, making him cover and clench, and yet just before the bell the Kid again got through with a trip-hammer right—and the Cyclone was down again as the Kid reeled back, the bell saving the Cyclone.

"You sure can hit!" Kelly's voice was hard, but he was smiling. "No matter. You're making it good. The crowd's gone wild."

It was wilder than ever in the seventh. Taking a beating half way, the Kid again came through, dropping the Cyclone to one knee with a right-cross. He came up like a shot and the Kid was into him, driving him back. In the crazy roaring of the crowd he heard the unmistakable report of a shot down in town, then another and another. In the roaring of the crowd it was rising into a bedlam down there—and the crazy crowd not hearing a single report of it.

For it was murder now. The Kid was hammering on. He took a terrific right to the face, a left that grazed the jaw, and then tore up with another one of those eight-inch rights, bouncing the Cyclone back on the ropes. As he came back the Kid caught him again, another eight-inch right, a left hook, another right, another hook, and a final up-swinging right that lifted the man from the floor. An

instant later he was stepping back and letting him fall.

"Start the count!" bawled a man.

The Kid was back in a corner, the Cyclone lying there, blood pooling around his face. The count was slow, but it was finally finished and the bald referee lifted the Kid's hand. No one yet seemed to have heard that wild shooting down the street.

"Take them off!" the Kid rammed his hands through the ropes to two of the bronc riders, and the gloves were almost snatched off. Now the old Colt was suddenly thrust into the Kid's hand. He wheeled, covering Kelly, the bald-headed referee, Tiger Johnson, and the rest of the prize fight mob that had surged into the ring. When they saw the six-shooter their hands started up, the crowd was shocked into sudden silence:

"I'll take the other two fifty now, Kelly!" The Kid glared.

"Well," Kelly was sawing out a fat roll of bills, the Cyclone stumbling to his feet just beyond him, "you can have it without pullin' a damned gun on a man, Kid."

"I wasn't quite sure of anything." The Kid laughed at him when he took the money. "Not sure yet. I'll let the sheriff of Poison Oak decide the rest of it."

"An' how he'll decide it!" Old Bob Halliday was back, six men behind him as he came climbing into the ring. "This town owes a lot to the Buckaroo Kid, 'cause ever'where yuh go, Mr. Kelly, somethin' happens. While this big fight was goin' on an' all the crowd drew up here, six men were down yonder takin' a sudden rush on our bank. We shot hell outa four of 'em. Two's still livin', an' they've got somethin' to say about yuh an' some of these fellas with yuh for yore sharp'ways. It ain't good. Get them paws up 'til I can get some handcuffs on yuh. Kid, yuh ain't only a first class bronc rider, yo're a first class fightin' buckaroo—an' I've got an extra hundred dollars in my pocket for yuh! Hell, I'm gonna make it five!"

But the Kid was not listening. A bronc rider had handed up his clothes. He was dressing right there in the ring, leaving Mr. Kelly's white trunks on—going to keep those for a souvenir!

GREENHORN BANDIT

By

WILLIAM L. JACKSON



"Put the gun down and ride off," the slim man said.



Could an old dog teach a puppy new
tricks when he was already chained
—by a law-dog?



SIDE by side, separated by a yellow slicker on the seat between them, the lawman and the slim man in cowman's clothes rocked with the motions of the jouncing stage, their faces humorless, stiff with the dirt and weariness of a long trip. On the seat across from them the dry goods drummer who had gotten aboard at the last stop before

Free Man Pass shifted his bulky body uncomfortably, protesting the hardships of travel in such a country.

As the stage came onto Government Flats, a brown-burnt country spotted with the sagging-sod houses of homesteaders, the slim man sniffed and eyed the crumbling fields critically. "Plumb burned up and blowin' away," he said. "Nothing but trouble here for them people now. Too much sod bustin' and not enough rain. Mebbe trouble for you, too, sheriff."

"Maybe so," the lawman nodded, shaking dust from his hat brim. "They won't all want to leave, and there's nothing left here. It's a lucky one who owns the shirt on his back."

The dry goods drummer nodded sagely and put a match to a fresh cigar.

The cool fragrance of the tobacco filled the coach, and the slim man unconsciously dampened his lips. Then, without warning, the coach lurched violently, and the drummer's cigar fell to the floor. A short laugh broke from the slim man's lips; and he continued to chuckle as the coach slowed rapidly and the driver's voice came back to them, shrilling loudly at the faltering horses.

They looked forward, and they saw the fallen tree which blocked the road. They felt the coach stop completely, and they saw the lone rider swing around the bend in the trail, threatening the driver with a drawn gun.

Surprise held them motionless for a moment, and then the sheriff crouched beneath the level of the window, pulling at the gun on his hip. The slim man grunted and rolled with the sheriff, and he put his left hand across the lawman's body, gripping the sheriff's wrist and jerking harshly, tossing the gun to the floor. The sheriff had time only to swear and glower at him, and then the stage driver's gun had hit the ground and the masked rider was looking at them through the window.

The bandit sat upon a scrawny spraddle-legged chestnut horse, and his slender body suggested a boy in the saddle rather than a man. He sat without the ease of a man accustomed to the saddle, and he wore the faded denims, low shoes, and patched shirt of a nester. Above the red bandana across his face his cheeks were

as brown as the baked flats, his blond head bare, and much of the dry and hopeless look of the land was in his determined blue eyes.

The slim man met the bandit's gaze straight-on, and he said: "Blind luck, I call it, riding out there as big as you please. A real target. You'd be a dead man if our fine sheriff here hadn't dropped his gun."

The young bandit pushed his horse nearer, and his voice snapped out brisk and hard. "Throw the gun out here."

The drummer gingerly picked the sheriff's gun from the floor and tossed it out the window, while the young outlaw dismounted and opened the coach door. "You mister," he said to the drummer, "go through their pockets and throw it all out here on the ground."

The drummer rose to obey, and the slim man shoved him roughly back across the coach. "If you want it from me," he said flatly, "you'll get it yourself."

THE young bandit stood motionless, indecision clouding his blue eyes, and the slim man laughed his short and defiant laugh. "Not so easy, is it, kid? Not near so easy as you thought it would be. You hooked into a stage carrying a sheriff, and that scared you. Now you've hooked into me, and I'm harder and tougher than any sheriff."

"Put up your hands," the bandit said harshly.

"Put the gun down and ride off," the slim man said. "Go back where you belong. Go back to your homestead. You're better off there."

"Put up your hands," the bandit said again "—or I'll let you have it."

"Let me have it then," the slim man said. "Let me have it with a sheriff watching you." His lips were drawn straight, hard against his teeth. "That's not what you want. Not a killing. All you want is a little money. Enough to buy seed or pay off a loan. And you've told yourself that you don't care how you get it. But you really do."

The bandit's cheeks paled, and his knuckles whitened on his gun. "For the last time," he said, "put up your hands." He put his foot on the step of the coach,

and he shoved his gun within a foot of the slim man's chest.

The slim man did not flinch. "You won't," he said. "You ain't cut out for killing and robbing." His tone changed and his words became something close to a threat. "Anyway, this is Curly Ben Hardford's territory. Did you think of that? You've heard of Curly Ben. He's stopped more stages than you could shake a stick at. What do you think him and his partners will think about you bustin' into their game like this? They'll hound you and hunt you, and they'll be worse than any sheriff on your trail. They'll kill you, or you'll throw in with them, and you'll be done for, for the rest of your life, either way."

The slim man raised his left hand and pointed. "They'll watch you from them ridges night and day. They may be watching you right now. You'll always be haunted by shadows."

The youngster's eyes flicked toward the ridge for an instant, and the slim man's hand drove downward, gripping the barrel of the bandit's gun and tearing it from his grasp, quickly turning it upon its owner.

He laughed his short and hard laugh again. "Kid," he said, "Curly Ben would sure laugh himself sick at this. You better clear out before I decide to leave you dead when we go. Get on your horse—pronto."

As he turned, the fear now within the youngster stiffened his back and shortened his steps. He mounted, and the slim man said:

"Ride over here, close."

The shoulder of his chestnut horse

touched the stage, so close did he ride, and the eyes which he turned toward the slim man were the shiny eyes of a frightened boy. Those eyes mirrored confusion as the slim man extended the gun, butt forward.

"Take it," the slim man said. "It's worth something. Now clear out, and next time know enough to stick to your own game."

"Thanks, mister." The youngster could hardly talk. "Thanks. I'm going." He whirled his horse, jumping the chestnut away from the coach and driving him around the bend in the trail.

Grumbling, the sheriff called for the driver to fetch his gun from the ground, and the dry goods drummer fairly bounced with joy as he patted the pocket which held his wallet.

"What a show!" the fat drummer exclaimed. "Yes, sir!" He slapped his thigh. "You saw through that one, all right. Yes, sir! You sure sent him running. This Curly Ben outlaw you were talking about better look to his guns if he crosses your trail. Yes, sir!"

The slim man looked at him coolly. "Mister," he said, "you can thank me with one of them cigars, and I'll tell you something."

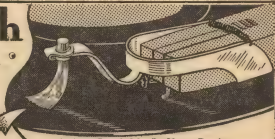
He reached forward with his right hand for the cigar which the drummer offered, and the sheriff's hand came with his from beneath the yellow slicker, manacled tightly to his wrist, as it had been for fifty miles, and would be when they boarded the train in Free Man Pass.

"Mister," the slim man said, lifting the cigar to his lips with his manacled hand, "I am Curly Ben Hardford."

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Cal triggered a shot as the men burst through the doorway.

CHAPTER

Baited Into a Trap

1

Taos was quiet. But whether it was only the village's habitual sleepy calm, or a cloak for something else, Cal Crockett did not know. He could not down the feeling there were people in this town who had knowledge he would give a great deal to learn. The trail from the wilderness, northward, to Santa Fe led through Taos. Anyone coming from that direction would be seen and remembered

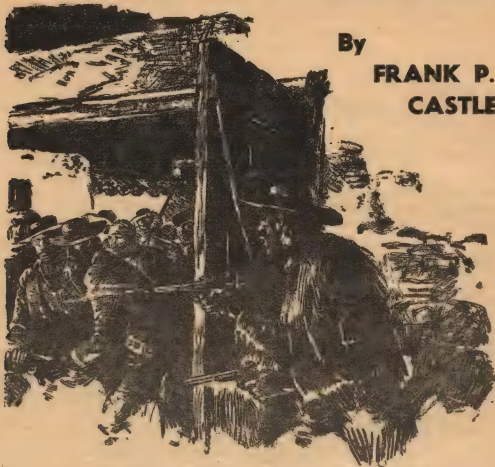
here; his business would be discussed and shrewdly guessed, even if there were not those—whom Cal had hoped to find—directly involved in it.

Pausing in front of the *alcalde's* house, the largest in the village, Cal pondered his next move. He had followed the long trail south, all the way from Snake country above Bear River, through the Rockies, past the Pueblo and Bent's Fort, riding alone and riding hard. From here it must lead on to Santa Fe. And from there to no one knew where. The only thing

BUCKSKIN BREED

By

FRANK P.
CASTLE



Trapper Cal Crockett set out to bait a band of murderous raiders—but every trail led him into an open trap . . . set by the hand of a beautiful girl.

Cal Crockett did know for certain was that he meant to follow it on to its end.

The *alcalde*, a grave, dignified man with a thin white beard had been courteous and attentive, but not helpful.

"You should know me, Don Estevan," Cal had said. "I've been in Toas twice before. Both times, I called to pay my respects."

"It is a hard thing to remember," the *alcalde* told him. "More and more of your buckskin kind appear each year. From your tallness and your long-barrel-

ed rifle, though, I seem to recall you. There was such a man who danced with my granddaughter—a child—at a *baile* three or four summer ago. She distracted me with talk of him for weeks afterwards. You, perhaps, Señor?"

"Did she wear a red ribbon in her hair?" Cal said, smiling faintly. "And was the top of her head barely above my belt? If so, I was the man, Don Estevan."

The *alcalde* nodded, dismissing the subject.

"You say you are alone," he said. "Is this not unusual?"

"Yes," Cal admitted. "And it explains my visit at this time. This past winter, I led a party of five, trapping north of Bear River. Our winter's take of beaver was very good. We were about ready to leave for rendezvous when our camp was raided, our beaver stolen, our horses stampeded. And of the five I alone remained alive."

"I am sorry to hear this," Don Estevan Higuerra said slowly. "An Indian raid?"

"Indians do not raid at night," Cal told him dryly. "No. These were white men—a sizeable party. I managed to get into timber and fought them from there. I survived, unhurt. I managed to get ponies from a Snake village, and I followed the raiders—"

Don Estevan's brow lifted. "To Taos?" he said incredulously.

Cal Crockett nodded. "Yes, Señor Alcalde. For a man who has been ten years in the mountains, it was not difficult. Three times, along the way, I saw what was left of other fur camps they had raided. I talked to Indians—Snakes, Utes, Kaws—who had also been robbed."

"And you think those who did the robbing are in Taos."

"Or near," Cal agreed. "Two of them were left dead at my camp. They were of your people."

He stood up and paced slowly across the big room in which the *alcalde* had received him. His Hawkins rifle was against the wall, where he had placed it for courtesy upon entering. This, his ragged buckskins, an unsheathed knife in his belt, and three Snake ponies were all he owned, now.

"This is the second home of every mountain man," he continued. "There is gossip about us here—where we are trapping and what our prospects are. There is also trade between Santa Fe and St. Louis. I can see clearly how it would be done—a swift raid, striking at the most successful trappers along a line five hundred miles long. The beaver brought here and slowly shipped east during the summer a few bales at a time. Handled so, it could be very profitable."

"Yes," Don Estevan admitted, frowning. "I find it hard to believe, but there

is the sound of truth in what you tell me. And you, alone, have taken it on yourself to track these raiders and deal with them?"

"Someone must," Crockett said. "Friends of mine have been killed. Among mountain men, Señor, a hurt done to one is done to all."

Don Estevan's frown deepened. "I will tell you first I have not heard of a raid on trappers, or of beaver coming into New Mexico," he said. "But if I do receive word, I must be the one to deal with it—not you. I am the law in Taos—"

"The law!" Cal said, with some bitterness. "In all respect, when has New Mexico law been applied fairly to any mountain man?"

The *alcalde* grimaced, nodding.

"I know," he agreed. "The law comes from Santa Fe, where it is made by men appointed in Mexico City. But even a little law is better than none. And it must be obeyed. I will give you a *permiso* to stay in the province. Return later this afternoon for it. Everything possible will be done by the government of New Mexico—not by you. Is this understood?"

Cal nodded, tight-lipped.

"I thank you for your courtesy and consideration," he said. "I understand."

The *alcalde* studied him thoroughly and also nodded, rising to signify the interview was over.

"Many of my people fear and dislike your kind," he observed. "This is a feeling I do not share. You bring something new into an old country—vitality, restlessness; I think you are the vanguard of many others like you. In the end, this should be good for New Mexico. I ask that you remember I have said these things—"

PASSING to a long, dim hall, and from this to the street, Cal thought there was a rustling ahead of him which might have been made by the skirts of a hurrying woman. He could not be sure, though, and it did not seem to matter, though he had closed the door of the big room on entering and it was ajar when he left.

Looking now at the small, dusty plaza, at the quiet street, the glare of the sun against whitewashed walls and the hunkered idlers who seemed to sleep with ser-

apes drawn up to their faces, Cal considered his next move. Why be bothered with a *permiso*, he thought. He'd ride on down to Sante Fe without it. And he'd have to be careful, since the *alcalde* would certainly send word ahead concerning him.

A short, fat man who wore the hide sandals and limp white garments of a peon suddenly appeared before Crockett, removing his sombrero and bowing.

"I am Pablo Viador," he announced. "I think you need a guide, Señor."

Cal snorted. "A guide to Taos?" he said. "If I hadn't been here before, I could see everything in town for myself in ten minutes."

"All that is in the open, perhaps," Pablo murmured. "But not things which are hidden. Bales of beaver fur, for instance—"

Cal clamped a hard hand on his arm.

"Talk!" he ordered quietly. "You tell me something I can use, and you'll get your reward. What do you know about beaver? How did you find out I'd be interested?"

Pablo Viador flexed his arm muscles and threw off Cal's hand.

"There can be no talk here," he said. "Come with me."

He turned away. Cal followed him.

They were nearing the end of the street to the north when Pablo turned suddenly aside at an old, low-roofed house. He opened a door. Stepping inside, Cal saw a big, bare room, dimly lighted by narrow windows set high in the walls. On the far side was an open hearth, below a hooded stone chimney. The floor was bare earth. In a corner was another door.

"Now, Señor—" Pablo murmured, behind him.

Cal looked around, and stiffened. The fat little man held a long-barreled, brass-bound pistol. It was lined at him and the hammer was back. This was too close quarters for the Hawken; Cal dropped the rifle, twisted, and lunged. As he moved, he was aware of someone coming up fast behind him. He gripped the pistol, thumb against the hammer so it could not be fired. He caught the little man's throat with his left hand and drove him hard against the wall.

Pablo's appearance of fat had been de-

ceptive. He was all hard muscle. He jerked the gun from Cal's hand and swung it. Cal swayed back to dodge, but was hit from behind and driven forward. The pistol barrel glanced from his forehead. Half-stunned, he dropped to his knees. His arms were caught and roughly pinned behind his back.

Someone came through the open front door—the second fellow here had been hidden behind it, waiting, Cal thought—and he received a swift impression of a girl in a chino blouse and a full skirt who kicked Pablo Viador in the shin, shouting something angrily. The little man grunted and pushed her away.

"*Por Dios, Carmela!*" he protested. "Don't interfere—"

Still unsteady from the blow against his head, Cal was jerked to his feet. He saw a mestizo's dark, impassive face at his shoulder. With him on one side and Pablo Viador on the other, both hands driven up against his back, he was hustled across the room and shoved through the door he had noted in a far corner.

He found himself in a small, narrow room. The door slammed, and he was in almost complete darkness.

In the mountains, a man learned quickly not to waste his energy in vain. Once he had determined that the door was securely barred and could not be jolted open—that the roughly squared timbers composing it were impervious to his knife—Cal stretched out on the floor and went to sleep.

That he had been baited into a trap was evident. Cal didn't think the trap would have worked if Pablo Viador alone had tried to spring it, and he meant to bring the little man to an accounting when the odds were more nearly even.

A cautious rattling of the door brought him instantly awake again. He rose, knife in hand. If this was Pablo, he might quickly lose his enthusiasm for whatever game it was he played and be disposed to talk as well when a naked blade touched his throat the instant he entered.

The door opened with a faint squeak, showing night blackness beyond. Cal reached out and gripped warm bare flesh. Something which felt like a mass of silken threads touched his skin. He grunted, hastily jerking his hand back, knowing

he had seized a bare shoulder and the thick long hair which fell loosely over it.

"Señor," a feminine voice whispered, "come with me. I have horses, and your rifle. The peon Pablo left to watch will look the other way—"

THE night sky was bright with stars. Crockett saw a slender silhouette and a lovely profile as the girl moved between him and a distant light. This was the girl Pablo had called Carmela. He saw horses waiting, and heard the peon mutter something uneasily. The girl answered him sharply. The man handed over the Hawken. Carmela swung with lithe smoothness up into the saddle on one of the waiting horses.

"Hurry!" she breathed. "There is much talk about what is to be done with you, and it may end at any moment. They may come before we can get away. Mount and follow me."

Cal shook his head.

"I'm not ungrateful," he said, "though I can't guess why you'd do this for me, girl. But I'm not rushing into anything more that I don't understand ahead of time. Where are you planning to ride?"

"To the camp of Abner Brunt," she told him. "He is an American—a merchant who has *Sante Fe* *políticos* in his pay and so can do many things no one else can. You will be safe with him. He is near the Arroyo Hondo. *Andale!*"

Some of the girl's urgency was communicated to him. Besides, the news that another American was nearby changed things somewhat. Toeing a brass stirrup, Cal lifted into a high-pommed saddle. The girl moved along the street at a rapid shuffle. Once clear of the town, she lifted the pace to a lope.

They left the road, moving through brush toward a towering line of dark hills. They splashed across a small stream, and another. Carmela led the way through increasingly rough country which was apparently well known to her.

They rode through thick, dusty chaparral, plunged down the bank of a shallow arroyo and moved along its bed. The girl abruptly stopped.

She said, "I want to listen a moment for horsemen behind us. Pablo Viador is a very shrewd and clever man, and he

moves fast, in spite of being fat. I feel sure he knows by now that you are no longer where he left you. If he is following us Abner Brunt, who is very clever, too, will also hear him. No trader likes unexpected visitors in the dark. I do not want any fighting tonight, Señor. I only want to see you safe with your own kind."

"Why do you want it?" Cal asked bluntly.

"There is no time to talk about that! Some time, I hope, I can tell you. I have heard that buckskin men can hear better than wolves. Are there horsemen behind us?"

"Yes," Cal said, after a moment of listening. "Four riders, at least, perhaps more—"

"And Abner Brunt's camp must be very close. *Venga!*"

Her horse leaped forward again. They left the arroyo, racing across another flat where thorny brush was thick. Suddenly the dark shadow of another horseman veered across her path.

The girl could not avoid a collision, though she managed to stay on her horse. Cal heard a surprised laugh as the other rider discovered she was a woman and snatched at her. The girl cried out, jerking away from him. Cal saw her twist and fall. He hauled up his mount and leaped down, dropping his Hawken for the second time this day.

Carmela scrambled to her feet and backed hurriedly away. The other man was also down and moving toward her; he did not see Crockett until the mountain man was almost on him.

Cal saw the glimmer of moonlight on steel as a handgun was hastily tilted at him. He drove directly into it, catching a bony wrist and whipping it down to one side. The merciless twist of his big wrist sent the gun flying aside into the dust.

Still crowding, he felt the thrust of a hard-muscled, wiry body against his. The man writhed and twisted, spitting curses as he struggled to break free.

Cal grunted, lifting an elbow joltingly against the other's chin. In the same motion, he hammered a forearm across the bridge of his nose. As the man gasped in pain and butted blindly at him, falling forward, he used his fist for the first time and slammed him into the dust.

Other horsemen were crashing through the brush from the direction he and Carmela had been riding. Cal, wiping his cheek on the stiffness of a buckskin, sleeve, looked for the girl and saw her several paces distant. She was motionless, lips parted as she stared at him in the moonlight, now fading as clouds gathered again.

"Get out of here, girl," he told her gruffly. "I can find Brunt alone, now. Slide into your saddle and pull out fast. And thanks—"

She nodded, coming swiftly to his side. Her hands rested lightly on his arms as she rose on tiptoe and brushed her lips against his scratched cheek.

Cal touched the spot where this light kiss had rested. Nothing that had ever happened to him, he thought, had been half as strange.

As she giggled her horse swiftly away, he scooped the handgun out of the dust. It was a five-shot pepperbox—a .31 calibre Blunt and Syms pistol. The man he had dropped swayed uncertainly up to his feet. Cal gestured brusquely for him to stand still and faced toward the swiftly approaching riders.

fire, "this buckskin tramp said he wanted to see you. He got my gun and herded me and the others ahead of him with it—"

Abner Brunt looked at Crockett with sharp interest. He had smooth, plump features, the pursed mouth of a man whose abiding interest was trade, and pale, unwinking eyes.

"You took a tough way to pay a call, Mister," he said slowly. "You must have a good reason. Mind telling me what it is?"

Cal complied, beginning with the raid on his outfit, above the Bear, and ending at this moment in the New Mexico night, a dozen miles or so beyond Taos.

"Some riders followed us out of town," he concluded. "They stopped when your men showed up, and turned back. Brunt, you know anything about all this?"

The trader pinched his chin thoughtfully.

"I know Pablo Viador," he said. "He's a government agent from Santa Fe, Crockett—obviously acting on the *alcalde's* orders to grab and hold you. I can't place the girl. From your description, she sounds like a *cantina* entertainer who took a shine to you. Old Don Estevan either knows who raided your beaver, and wanted you put out of the way, or he intended to find out quick and grab himself a share, using you as a club. You did right to hunt me up. You and me and Jake Seeley are the only Yanks hereabouts, and we got to stick together. Jake, I'm changing plans. Pass orders that we're pulling out of here and heading for Sante Fe in half an hour."

"Hold on!" Seeley protested. "That isn't the way to handle this, Brunt!"

"No?" the trader said softly. "It's

CHAPTER

2

Talk of Gun-Fire

A fire burned briskly under a cutbank. The blocky figure of a man waited quietly beside it. As Cal rode up, he was aware of mules, close-picketed, nearby. The riders with him pulled up. The one who had tangled with him dismounted, scowling bleakly and rubbing a bruised mouth.

"Brunt," he growled, to the man by the

Message from Garcia

Texas Artist Tells Why It's Smart to Switch to Calvert

SAN ANTONIO, Texas—Tony R. Garcia, San Antonio artist and illustrator, knows that it's *taste* that counts in a whiskey. "Tell everybody," he says, "that I switched to Calvert because of its *mild, and smooth taste.*"



my way, Jake. I've told you before that brains beat force, every time, in handling things like this. There isn't a thing we can do here that we can't do better in Santa Fe—Crockett, you better eat—"

Cal nodded. He settled slowly on his heels, reaching for the coffee pot. Seeley looked bitterly at him and began to shout orders. He hadn't got his gun back, and Cal had no intention of returning it. Seeley, he thought, was a man who would never forget a beating or cease watching for a chance to repay it.

Crossing the Alameda, where a stir of movement was beginning once more following siesta, the mules in Brunt's train quickened their pace, as though realizing journey's end was near. The sun was setting beyond the wide plateau far to the west beyond the distant valley of the Rio Grande, and there was a chill in the air. Lights were beginning to flicker along the streets of Santa Fe.

Riding beside Abner Brunt, Cal remembered what he had said to Don Estevan. Every mountain man had two homes. One was where he happened to be; the other was here in New Mexico, at Taos and Santa Fe. Maybe because there was kinship between people to whom individual pride and courtesy were everything, and the buckskin men who acknowledged no masters and esteemed only those who stood squarely on their two feet. Cal didn't know. But he did know he had always gotten on well with the inhabitants of this Mexican province, and liked them. In spite of the mission which brought him and the wariness tightening his nerves as he rode into this center of all life and government in the vastness of New Mexico, he was very glad to be in Santa Fe again.

The train turned in at a freight yard formed by a brush corral beyond a big, square building where new whitewash covered the scars of great age.

"My place," Brunt said. "It used to be the town house of the De Vegas, until the last of the line lost it at monte. The *ricos* here, the old families, snub me, of course. Not that I give a damn! Money buys everything, and I'll build a pile big enough to force recognition from every *hacendado* in New Mexico—and in other parts."

CAL was aware of fanaticism in the man's voice. Trade, literally, was Brunt's whole life. Nothing else mattered. And an *Americano* engaged in trade here and prospering had a tough chore to stay on his feet. Brunt had candidly admitted that bribery of government officials was his biggest item of expense—big enough, Cal guessed, to threaten his solvency. The moral aspect of this obviously didn't bother the trader at all. He was the sort who would let nothing at all keep him from gaining what he wanted.

"I've got a new warehouse out back," Brunt continued. "Had a hell of a time securing permission to build it; these people don't like anything less than two hundred years old. It's an attitude due to be changed soon, Crockett. Yankees are pushing people; we go where there's space and unused land. The government here is weak and corrupt—one regiment of U. S. cavalry could ride in and take over the whole province. And it will some day soon. Make yourself at home. I've got to go around to the Governor's Palace and report this wool I've brought in from above Taos. I'll make some cautious talk and see if I can find out anything about your beaver."

Cal nodded, swinging down. Seeley wasn't with the train as it moved into the yard. The man had stayed away from him, though Cal had been continually aware of his sullen watchfulness. A one-eyed *mestizo* opened the door of Brunt's house and conducted him silently to a room at the back. This servant also had a cropped ear, which Cal had heard was punishment for theft where *hacendados* made their own law.

The man brought an armful of clothing which he piled on the room's great high bed. Cal nodded his thanks; he couldn't go about in buckskins without a *permiso*. Even in the garb of the country his height and broad shoulders would make him conspicuous, but perhaps after nightfall he wouldn't be noticed. And tonight he meant to start his own search for the stolen fur he had trailed so far.

"Thanks, *amigo*," he said, pulling on the ruffled shirt, the tight trousers and short jacket of the country. "Now, if you'll give your *patron* a message from me—"

The *mestizo* shook his head, opening

his mouth and pointing to it. Cal felt a touch of chill. There was no tongue in the servant's head.

"I'm sorry," he told the man quietly, settling a broad-brimmed, flat-crowned hat on his head and pulling its chin strap tight. "Maybe there'll be an American flag flying over this town some day. If so, the sort of thing that happened to you will never happen to anybody else. And you might even bring to judgement whoever it was that did it to you—"

He shoved the pepperbox into the waistband of his trousers and moved toward the door. For a moment he thought the mute would try to stop him, then he stepped out of his way. Cal was certain gratitude flickered in his dull eyes.

A windy, chill night was over the town as he moved toward the plaza. Cal crossed the ancient bridge spanning Santa Fe creek. Once he stopped to listen, with the impression that guarded footsteps were following him, but all he heard was a burst of brassy music from ahead.

The source of this music, he presently discovered, was the Governor's Palace. Keeping to the far side of the plaza and stopping in front of the *Capilla de los Soldados*, the ruined and abandoned Soldier's Chapel, he saw servants holding aloft candles under the colonnade where *rico* carriages pulled up before the doorway.

A social affair of some sort was being celebrated tonight. Everything in New Mexico centered in the long, low adobe structure on the north side of the plaza. There his search for the stolen furs must begin. Brunt had spoken of cautious talk with the province officials. Cal wanted quick action; it wasn't in him to stay back and let another speak for him. He left the dark shadows of the ruined church and crossed the narrow street to the plaza. A few idlers were there, watching the rich and mighty of the province.

Cal had never been in the Governor's Palace. He knew from talk, that there was a printing office at one end of the building, and a prison—said to be unused—at the other. The main entrance to the palace was directly across from him, with a few bored soldiers lounging about it in a semblance of guardmount. He could stride boldly across the street and on in-

side. Once there, he'd find a way to make the governor himself listen.

A bent-bodied beggar shuffled toward him along the street, whining a sing-song plea for coins. Cal looked narrowly at him, and as he did so a figure darted from under the colonnade, hurrying around a carriage which had just stopped. He had a momentary, startled impression of high-piled glossy hair, of a full, rich gown and of a *reboso* which was lowered from a pale face.

"Señor, I thank the Saints you are safe! I made a mistake. It has frightened me, on our hurried journey from Taos. This is one place where you must not be. There are those around the governor who would do anything for a little money, and if they learn why you are here—Come with me, quickly!"

SHE caught at his arm, tugging. Cal grunted, recalling that when he had seen this girl before she had worn a chino blouse and a swirling skirt, and her legs had been bare. Now she walked on high heels and hours of work must have gone into the arrangement of her hair.

"Not so fast," he growled. "Too many people are telling me what to do—"

"Someone must! You do not understand—"

The beggar pushed between them, straightening and lowering his serape to reveal a familiar fleshy face.

"Carmela, I told you not to interfere," Pablo Viador said. "But you did, and you know what has resulted. Let me handle this, now—"

Cal whipped the gun from his waistband and drove it into the little man's belly with a force which brought a painful grunt.

"Situation's changed, from the last time," he growled. "I've got the gun now, and I intend to make better use of it than you did. Girl, I don't understand any of this, but I don't want you involved if there's trouble. You walk back the way you came—slow and quiet, or the government is going to lose the spy it set on me."

"I, a government spy?" Pablo Viador sputtered. "*Por Dios*, you speak an insult not to be endured."

The girl said something hotly. It sounded unladylike, but the words ran together

too rapidly for Cal to understand. He cut her short, jabbing with the gun again.

"Walk ahead of me, Pablo. We'll find some dark spot where we can talk."

The girl stamped her foot helplessly. Looking back as he and Pablo left the plaza, Cal saw Don Estevan join her. He pushed the little man on toward the ruined church.

"Señor Crockett," Pablo Viador said over his shoulder, "when we found what Carmela had done, we rode to Santa Fe from Taos faster than anyone ever has before. Don Estevan said he thought you would still be safe until you reached Santa Fe, at least, and if he could only talk to the governor, himself, perhaps no harm would come to you here."

"None will," Cal growled. "But not because of Don Estevan's efforts!"

"He is your friend!"

"Wasn't he the one who ordered you to grab me and lock me up? Tell me!"

"Yes," Pablo agreed reluctantly. "But not for the reason you think! *Madre mia*, listen to all of it, Señor!"

They had reached the ruined Soldier's Chapel, and he was intent on the little man stumbling ahead of him. Too, intent. Shadowy figures were suddenly around them. As Cal whirled, lifting the gun, he thought they must have been hidden in the wrecked church—and thought, too, Pablo had signaled to them, even as he heard the little man grunt as he was knocked off his feet and trampled. A musket barrel hammered Cal's wrist, knocking the gun from his hand. Arms wrapped around his legs and slammed him to the ground. He twisted as he fell, kicking hard. Then a pistol muzzle was against his head, and a voice spoke exultantly:

"You're the one, all right. *Dios* there isn't another man as tall in all this cursed province! On your feet, *cabron*. Carefully, now; I'll kill you with pleasure if you make a wrong move—"

"Do you want the other one, also *Capitan*?" someone muttered.

"What would I want with a smelly dog of a beggar? Kick him and send him about his business. And you, tall one, start walking. For your sake I would advise you to do as you are told. And I'm warning you—better not cause any trouble."

CHAPTER

3

Shadows Out of Hell

A beef tallow candle sputtered dimly in a wall socket. The man who faced Cal Crockett was one of the jaded kind already dissipated beyond redemption when selected for service in this most distant of Mexico's provinces. Apparently Santa Fe was a haven for such wasters. His uniform, with its ornate encrustation of gold braid, was disheveled and soiled. He lighted a *cigarro* and studied Crockett with a twisted smile.

"Many stories are told of this place, *Americano*," he said. "The peons cross themselves when they pass it, and say there are ghosts here. Perhaps. Many have died within these walls. And tonight one will be added to the number. Because there is too much at stake to let you live. With what I have been promised, I can buy a better post than this cursed hole of Santa Fe—"

Cal said nothing. He was on his feet. The two soldiers who had helped this *Capitan* grab him held his arms. This was the ancient prison at the west end of the Governor's Palace. Apparently no one else was in the place. He had been hustled along a dank, foul-smelling corridor and into a room where there were no windows. Now the officer was lifting his gun and thumbing back its hammer. Cal slid his feet apart and braced himself, preparing for violent action. The two soldiers cursed, clinging tighter to his arms.

Apparently struck by a sudden thought, the *Capitan* holstered his gun. From his belt he lifted the pistol Cal had dropped, and which he had recovered.

"With your own weapon, eh?" he murmured. "Perhaps the privilege of a gentleman, granting that you are one—"

The light in this place was tricky. Cal thought a shadow moved behind the *Capitan*. He jerked an arm abruptly, swinging the man on his right in front of himself. The officer growled, shifting his gun. Then Cal saw the man take a step forward under what seemed to be the impact of a blow from behind. The hand holding the gun sagged, his eyes rolled up and he spilled forward on his face.

Another jerk almost freed Cal's right

arm. With the same movement, he jack-knifed his knee at the man in front of him, felt the recoil of flesh under this blow, turned fast on the other one and bruised his knuckles on nose and mouth. One soldier was down and rolling in pain on the floor; the other turned aside, both hands to his face as he dropped to his knees. Crockett lifted the gun from the *Capitan's* relaxing grip. He saw the haft of a knife whose steel was buried in the officer's back.

The shadow he had half-glimpsed moved again. The mute *mestizo* from Abner Brunt's *casa* bent to retrieve his knife.

"You followed me, *amigo*?" Cal asked sharply. "You watched and saw what had happened and came here to do this for me?"

The man looked down at the still body. The woodenness of his countenance was broken by a bleak scowl. Then his glance returned to Crockett and he nodded.

"A thousand thanks, then," Cal said. "I'm greatly in your debt."

The mute touched his arm urgently, pointing toward the front of the building. Cal nodded agreement and they moved out together. They were still in the passageway, Cal leading, when the massive door at the street banged open. Abner Brunt's heavy-barreled body was silhouetted there.

"Crockett?" the man called, voice softly tense. "I got here in time! Come along with me. My warehouse is the only safe place for you in Santa Fe now—"

The brassy music from the palace was loud in the night, but above it Cal heard the bellow of a command. Soldiers were falling into formation, under the colon-

nade. Brunt turned him the other way and they walked hurriedly into the thick shadows cast by the ancient buildings of Santa Fe.

"I couldn't get to the governor," Brunt muttered. "He's a pretty good man, but surrounded by sticky-fingered grafters. Word about you is loose in the town, Crockett. There are three different factions here that want to grab you. I think one of them is sending those soldiers out to comb the town for you. We got a little time yet, though—"

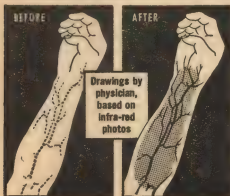
"To do what?" Cal demanded. "Hell, I'm tired of being shoved! I want to see the governor—"

"There's not a chance of doing that tonight. Save your breath, now, and move fast."

Cal was suddenly aware that the two of them were alone. The mute had disappeared. He couldn't recall having seen him come out of the old prison. He wondered about this, but it was only a tiny part of a crazy-quilt pattern in which nothing made sense. Don Estevan—Pablo Viador—Carmela—An evil trio, perhaps, who had set all this in motion. But when he recalled the *alcalde's* quiet voice, Carmela's concern for him, and Pablo being kicked by the soldiers, it didn't seem possible.

STILL, if they hadn't been responsible for what had happened this night, who had betrayed him? He shook his head, baffled, knowing that a guess now would mean nothing at all. Maybe Brunt could clarify the situation when he was ready to talk again.

They swung together through the brush fence into Abner Brunt's freight yard. A



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fire was blazing in its center, and Cal saw dark figures clustered about it. Brunt dug a key from his pocket and opened a big door.

Stepping inside, Cal heard the trader close the door again and move past him, rasping a Swedish match alight. By its sickly yellow glow, Cal saw him touch the flame to a candle.

This was a place thickly crowded with boxes, barrels, and bales. There was a mingling of many smells—raw wool among them. But there was another odor even stronger than wool, one that dominated the riverfront at St. Louis and clung to every boat plying western streams. It was the odor of raw, roughly-cured fur. Beaver fur.

Cal lifted his gun.

"Maybe you could give me a quick, smooth story, Brunt," he said quietly. "But beaver in the quantities you must have stored here don't move into Santa Fe for trade. Have you got pelts under this roof that I trapped and skinned and packed myself?"

Brunt nodded, almost casually.

"Yes," he answered. "And others. More than eighty packs in all. Close to forty thousand dollars worth, I figure. Easy with that gun. Remember I brought you in here—"

The trader grunted wearily, scrubbing his jaw with the heel of his hand.

"Go on," Cal ordered tonelessly.

"I planned it, Crockett; I brought Seeley in to pick the men and handle the whole job. A damned bad mistake. He's both treacherous and a coward. Murder was his idea—not mine. He had it figured from the first that if he killed everybody whose fur he took, nobody could hit back at him later. I think you must be the only buckskin man he missed."

"A fatal mistake for him," Cal said. "And for you, too."

"I doubt it, in my case," Brunt replied calmly. "Look, I'm a trader, and a damned good one. I came out to Santa Fe to build something that would last a long time. This country is going to be part of the Union, and before very long. I meant to get in ahead of everybody else and have the best and biggest business in New Mexico when it changes from a Mexican province to a United States territory."

He began to pace the hard-packed dirt floor.

"I put a lifetime's savings into what I've got here. And it was more than enough, Crockett—except for one thing. Those sly grafters around the governor have leeches me with special taxes, imposts, levies, and assessments until I'm bled white. They don't like *Americanos*. And they especially don't like an *Americano* showing a profit on trade. They've been working from the first to ruin me."

"I'm sorry as hell for you," Cal said coldly. "Maybe you think your business is more important than my four dead friends and all those others Seeley killed. I don't."

"They backed me into a corner, this spring," Brunt went on, ignoring him. "I found I needed cash—a lot of it—in a hurry. Beaver would provide it. So I got the beaver. Delivered in St. Louis a few packs at a time, it would give me enough bank credit for the time I figure I'm going to need before there's a Yankee governor in Santa Fe."

"Your time is up now," Cal interrupted. "There isn't much law in this country, but there is some. Enough to hold you till the U. S. Army can take you out of here for a murder trial."

"Damn it!" Brunt said harshly. "Can't you see this thing clear yet? Seeley wanted to kill you up at Taos, where I had to take him on a routine trading trip I didn't dare skip, so he wouldn't grab the beaver when I was gone. Because he's a coward, he bribed that *Capitan* to kill you tonight. I saved you at Taos, and I saved you here. Why? Because I need help, and you're the one to provide it. This beaver isn't cash you can tuck in your pocket and ride out of New Mexico with. Too many people know about it and want it. You can pull trigger and walk out of here to announce the fur is yours—but if you do, you won't live until dawn. You'll only please a lot of people who'll find their grab easier with me dead."

"Let me get this straight," Cal said slowly. "You proposing some kind of partnership for you and me?"

"Of course. It's the only way out, now, for both of us. Be practical, Crockett! You've got the toughness to handle Seeley

and his men. You can help me face down those in the government here who want my blood. Together, we can get the beaver to St. Louis. I'll give you half of that—and half of my business, besides. By the time the stars and stripes fly over Santa Fe, we can be the biggest men in New Mexico."

"Mister, you don't know much about my kind," Cal said. "I'd like to stay alive, but no so much that I'd buy a few more years at the price you're quoting."

Brunt smiled grimly. "I think you're going to have your mind made up another way, Crockett. Or have you been watching me so close you've forgot to do any listening?"

Cal heard it, then—the low, growling sound made by a crowd gathering beyond the warehouse door.

"That's Seeley and his bunch," Brunt went on. "I figured on this. I could see a showdown would be the only way to settle things. And now it's here."

SOMETHING hit the warehouse door with violent force. A battering ram, Cal thought—a beam driven hard by the crowd clustered outside. He heard the chant as they drew back, poised, and hammered it forward again. The door groaned, sagging in its frame. It wouldn't hold long.

"Any other way out of here?" he snapped at Brunt.

The trader shook his head, lifting his gun from its hide holster for the first time and snuffing the candle.

"We'll walk out through that door," he said, "or we'll get dragged through it, toes up and dead. We've got a double handful of shots between us, Crockett; if we make each one count, we can win. Those taking Seeley's orders—each one thinking he'll get a fat share of the beaver he helped steal—are vaqueros and peons, good for raiding fur camps at night but I

don't think they'll stand long against hot lead."

"Aren't there any here who take your orders?" Cal asked sharply.

"Only that lop-eared thief in the *casa*, and I'm not sure of him because of some whippings I've handed out to keep him in line. The rest of my boys—drovers and stock-handlers—are on the Trail. That door's coming down from the next wallop it takes. You pick your targets on the left side. I'll handle those on the right—"

Crockett suddenly realized he was no more than a pawn here, being manipulated with hard cleverness by Brunt. The trader had maneuvered him into a position where he had to fight for him. And, once he had made such an effort, Santa Fe would believe he was, in fact, the partner Brunt wanted him to be. Not that he had taken much stock in Brunt's talk. But this was something to remember and act on later. As the trader had warned, the warehouse door was coming down.

It broke with a splintering crash, folding inward. The men outside howled exultantly, coming through the opening. The fire still blazed in the yard, silhouetting them. Cal triggered a shot into the mass, heard a cry of pain, and saw a man drop. A pair of guns winked hotly in reply, but their lead was wasted. He fired again, moving forward, and saw those about the door on his side waver and break, pulling back.

Brunt was working faster. Listening to the repeated blasting of his pistol, Cal thought the man had forgotten his own injunction not to waste lead. Still husbanding his own, he came up to the door, turned to narrow the target his body presented, and slid through.

Men had gathered at a little distance, and someone was shouting, trying to drive them back again. Seeley the coward, Cal thought, moving along the warehouse

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wall, keeping in the dark shadows.

They edged reluctantly toward him again in a thin line. Cal counted five of them. Brunt's gun was silent now, and the trader hadn't followed him out. Cal shook his head angrily, with the thought this was developing into a bad fight. His gun bucked for the third time; he had seen one of Seeley's men lift a long-barreled musket, and drove him back a step and around in a jarring fall. It was good shooting with a strange weapon—too good. He was due for a miss.

Seeley shouted, prodding his followers closer. Cal reached the far end of the warehouse, and found himself against the brush fence. It had been toughly woven to pen stock in, and no man could force his way through it. Turning, he lifted his gun again, and its menace halted those following him. He could hold them off a moment longer, Cal thought, and maybe drop another. But he wouldn't accomplish much more than that.

If this was the case he'd meet it head on, moving forward. No man lived forever, and none knew it better than a mountain man. The trapper's growl sounded in his throat as he started with a long stride toward those who had killed his friends, up on the Bear.

As though his move had been a signal, someone yelled out at the street. By the light of the fire he saw two figures suddenly appear, and heard the heavy boom of an outside hand gun. It was echoed by the blast of a *fusil*, one of the heavy muskets still used in this country. Cal triggered another shot from his weapon. Caught between two fires, Seeley's men broke and began to run.

CAL slanted toward the fire, looking hurriedly for Seeley. Brunt had been right; the fur raiders couldn't stand against hot lead. Overwhelming their victims, killing quickly in the dark, had been more their kind of bravery. He saw Pablo Viador hastily reloading his big pistol, and Don Estevan Higuerra, his musket still tilted, looking contemptuously at those running past.

A small gun snapped waspishly, and someone grunted with hurt behind Crockett. He whirled. Seeley had blood from a fresh hit on his shirt, but the

gun with which he had waited to put lead in Crockett's back was still leveled. Cal fired instantly, and this time his luck left him. It was a clean miss.

He crouched and leaped at the man. Seeley's first shot went over his head. His second exploded almost in Cal's face, stinging his cheek with burning powder. Then Cal was on him, both arms about his body to lift Seeley high with a powerful burst of strength. The man fired another shot blindly as he was twisted and dropped. There was a knee under his spine when he landed.

Somewhat shaken, Crockett turned back to the fire. He had done this once to a Ute warrior—had never thought he'd use such a deadly trick against a white. But perhaps the blackness of a man's soul counterbalanced the color of his skin.

Pablo Viador was at the fire, expostulating with a girl in a white dress who tightly gripped a small pistol, evidently the weapon which had wounded Seeley.

"Carmela, I have told you not to interfere—"

"By the Saints!" the girl told him hotly. "Am I to stand still and see him killed, by a coward from behind? And do not tell me I did wrong to follow you two. As you see, my gun was needed—"

"Silence!" Don Estevan commanded. He looked at Crockett. "You have found your fur, Señor? Good. I thought from the first it would be here. One my age understands quickly the evil in such a one as Brunt. Pablo is my trusted servant, not a government spy. I guessed at once in Taos who had robbed and killed your friends, but I knew if you came on to the hotbed of intrigue that is Santa Fe these days, you would be in trouble. So I ordered Pablo to seize and hold you until I could decide what must be done. Unfortunately, Carmela cavedropped when you talked with me, and she knew, which I did not, that Brunt was nearby—"

Cal grunted, looking hard at the girl. But she had enormous eyes, and there was an expression in them which instantly stifled his anger.

"Tell me one thing, Don Estevan," he growled. "Just who is Carmela?"

The old *hacendado* smiled.

"A little girl with a red ribbon in her hair who danced with a buckskin man at a

baile and never forgot him. My granddaughter. And—*por Dios!*—it is an old man's consolation that perhaps you can cope better with her temper than I."

Cal grunted again. "Maybe we'll talk about that soon, Señor," he said. "Now, there's a small fortune in beaver here, and I figure it belongs mainly to me. Some things have been said—partly by you—that I've got to think about. There should be room for an honest trader and a tough one, here. One who knows and likes your people, and who'd have no part of any graft. You think you could talk to the governor and get his permission for me to use the beaver for that purpose?"

"Yes," Don Estevan agreed.

"Good. There's only one chore left, then—to find Brunt—"

"You won't have to look far," Abner Brunt said softly.

He stood beyond the fire, grinning at them, a gun in his hand.

"Forgot to mention there was a door into the stable, and another pistol in my pocket," the trader continued. "This was a game where I couldn't lose, Crockett though it would have been over quicker if that lop-eared servant of mine had kept you in the *casa*, like I ordered. If you got Seeley, I planned to eliminate you, and if he got you, I figured he'd lose enough of his boys so I could make a dicker and still use him. Now I've got just enough time, before the soldiers arrive, to get rid of you. And of Don Estevan, who's been working against me with the governor."

"You have been a liar, a cheat and a murderer," Don Estevan said bitterly.

"Sure," Brunt admitted easily. "And

it's mighty sad, but you and all the rest are going to be found dead here."

Cal knew it wouldn't work twice in one night: still, he went across the fire at Brunt. He saw the man go back a step and grin, pulling trigger; he saw gun-flame and felt ripping pain high in his body. He was down and Brunt's grin was widening as he swung his weapon toward the others. Then, abruptly, agony twisted the man's round face, to be succeeded by blankness as he began to fall. He crashed into the dirt almost beside Crockett, and Cal saw the haft of a knife protruding from his back.

The mute *mestizo* came up quietly. His lips moved soundlessly. He knelt, lifted Cal's hand, and placed it against his forehead.

"You must have treated him with kindness," Don Estevan said slowly. "He is your servant now."

Then Carmela was beside Cal, also lifting him, cradling his head against her breast, and weeping.

"*Cara mia!* Do not move. I will take care of you—"

Cal grunted, sitting up.

"Only a shoulder tear," he said. "I'm all right."

"By the Saints, you're not! Do as you're told, Señor! Lie still!"

Cal heard Don Estevan chuckle dryly.

"Come, Pablo," the *alcalde* of Taos said. "There will be blessed peace and quiet for us. And you, Señor—she is your problem now—"

Cal looked at the girl's tear-streaked face. He pulled her against himself with his good arm and kissed her.

THE END

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SON OF A ★ ★ ★ LAW-DOG

Young Dave Ordway got a gun cub's baptism when he watched three gamblers play a death-dealing game of Russian roulette.

By
COSTA
CAROUSSO

"It's either you or me, now," Dave said quietly.



blood. Beside him, staring into the dying lawman's face with sunken, red-rimmed eyes, sat his sixteen year old son, holding his limp wrist as though the strength of his young hand could stay the man from his dark journey.

He had sat motionless like that for thirty-six hours.

"Dave," I said.

The boy didn't move.

"Dave, better go upstairs and get some sleep."

THE only sound in the room was the harsh, tortured breathing of the man sprawled starkly on my operating table staining the white sheets with his

The boy shook my hand from his shoulder and sprang from the chair, his awkward body tense, and his lips quivering from his pain and fear. "Sleep!" he echoed. "Do you think I can sleep while my father's dying? Do you think I can sleep while the dirty son that did this is still alive?"

"Quiet!" I said warningly. "You yelling isn't hurting the man who shot him none, but it is hurting your father." It was the wrong thing to say, and I knew it instantly, but thirty-six hours of watching your best friend die is enough to scrape anyone's nerves raw.

"I'll kill him," the boy vowed. "I swear I'll—"

He broke off and sank back into the chair, staring blindly at the wall, rigid, as though listening to the sound of his own words.

It wasn't hard to guess what was going on in Dave's mind. I'd known him since the day he was born, and I knew the code he had grown up with. It couldn't have been different for any lawdog's son: "*You kill my father, and I'll step into his place. And after that it's either you or me.*" But Dave wasn't ready to step into his father's place; Dave wasn't a man yet. Dave was barely sixteen.

I watched his face show the uncertainty that was inside him, watched the uncertainty give place to terror, and then to shame and guilt.

"I'll kill him," he murmured, almost inaudibly. There was no conviction in his voice. He slumped lumpy in the chair. He covered his face with his hands.

"You want to do something about bringing the man who did this to justice?" I asked.

Dave whirled around, rose from his chair.

"Of course I do," he said earnestly "Of course I do."

My mind had been working overtime the last few minutes, and suddenly the pieces of the puzzle I'd been worrying about since they'd carried Ordway into my office, seemed to form some sort of pattern, and I glimpsed a plan. I wasn't at all sure anything would come of it, but at least it would keep Dave moving and acting instead of just sitting there thinking.

"I want you to round up three men," I told him. "John Calloway, Four-Ace Doenig, and Ralph Mudge. Find them and tell them I want them here. I think they'll come."

The boy moved swiftly across the room, arm outstretched toward the gunbelt lying on the floor below his father's feet.

My hand on his elbow stopped him. "No," I told him. "You won't need that—yet."

"Did one of them—?"

"Don't waste time," I told him, steering him toward the door. "Hurry."

After he had gone, I tried to piece together what I knew. It was very little. Two shots had been heard the night Ordway was shot down in an unlit alley, and both bullets had gone into Ordway's chest. His own gun had been in his hand when they found him, but sniffing the barrel and then examining the cylinder told me it had not been fired.

Without thinking I lifted the gun skyward and tightened my finger slightly. The hammer fell instantly but instead of an explosive roar there was a feeble click. I squeezed again and again, until the hammer had fallen futilely on all six shells. I tried the other gun. It was the same. The bullets were duds, all twelve of them.

It hadn't been easy to put in those duds, I knew, but anyone determined enough to kill Bill Ordway, and afraid to try it in a fair fight, could have done it. Right off-hand I remembered that Bill liked to relax in the barber chair when he lay back for a shave, and always hung up his gunbelts; and almost everyone in town must have heard him mention that a herd of wild horses on the roof couldn't break his sleep once he'd hit the blankets. Almost anyone in town could have done it, but I could name only three men who had any reason. And they had plenty.

None of the three men Dave herded into my office half an hour later seemed very glad to see me, but only Four-Ace Doenig expressed himself openly.

"What's the idea?" he wanted to know. "I'm losing money every minute I'm away from my tables. You're wasting your time as well as mine if you think—"

"The idea," I interrupted, "is that the three of you are under suspicion of attempted murder. I think you'll agree

that that's stating it as briefly as possible, and I'm going to make all my statements equally to the point. So let's not have any more talk about wasting time.

"You, Doenig—for the past sixteen years you've been trying to swing the elections so you could put in Ordway's place a man who would allow you a greater—shall we say, a greater percentage of profit."

I saw Doenig's fingers began itching for his hideout gun, but I knew he wouldn't use it. "Don't look like you'd like to shoot me," I told him. "It would show very bad judgment."

Doenig's fingers uncurred, and in the silence that fell I noticed two reassuring things: The sheriff's breathing had become a bit quieter and deeper, and my own was probably not audible to the three men, in spite of the tension I felt.

Calloway and Mudge, I saw, were watching the gambler narrowly but were avoiding looking at each other. Mudge's fat face had grown red down to his collar, and Calloway's thin lips were almost white.

"Having murder in one's heart is probably as bad as having blood on one's hands," I told them, "and it's easy to see that neither of you have an easy conscience."

"You'd probably get all the water you need, Mudge, if Sheriff Ordway dies," I said, "but beside that you'd get the chance to cut off the rest of the valley from the railroad. The other ranchers' steers wouldn't offer much competition to your beef after they'd been driven three hundred miles through the badlands, and you'd become a rich and powerful man."

Watching Mudge closely, I could see the preliminary symptoms of a stroke. "Better watch your diet, Mudge," I warned him. "Your blood pressure is up much too high. Watch your diet—and your ambitions. Either of them can kill you."

I turned away from Mudge and faced Calloway. He'd been drinking heavily. He lacked either the stomach or the nerves for drinking, and whiskey seemed to light fires inside him that slowly burned him up. His hands were trembling at his sides, and along his sunken jaw a muscle jerked uncontrollably.

"Whiskey helps some men forget," I told him, "and some it makes remember. And it isn't good to think too much of another man's wife—even if she's dead and he's slowly dying."

Wordlessly, with a speed and fury that surprised me, Calloway leaped forward, striking at my face and arms. I put my palm against his thin chest and shoved him away. He fell to the floor like an unstuffed scarecrow.

"Still love her, don't you Calloway? Still love her as much as the day she married Bill Ordway, and you swore you'd kill him. Still love her, though she's been dead sixteen years."

Calloway opened his mouth to speak and a paroxysm of coughing seized him. He covered his mouth with a wadded handkerchief, but I could see the spreading stain. When he was quiet at last, he wiped his lips carefully and rose to his feet.

"I've always hated Ordway," he said, "and as long as I live, I'll never forget Catherine. But," he added, and there was a note of contempt in his voice, "I doubt you can figure what that adds up to."

I wasn't at all sure. I wasn't sure of anything. I knew some of the workings of the human mind, but I didn't know them all. Greed was here, lust for power was here, and the ravaging acid of hate. But which had blasted treacherously out of the night and smashed down Bill Ordway; I did not know. Maybe my game would tell.

I turned my back to the three men and bent down for one of the sheriff's guns. I broke it and punched out the six shells. Five of them I dropped into my pocket, the sixth I shoved into the cylinder.

"Russian roulette, gentlemen," I said. "Any number can play, but it is said to be played only by the very drunk, the weary of living—or those with an untroubled conscience." I snapped the cylinder into place, spun it several times, and lifted the gun to my temple. I watched the three men watching me, and when I saw that I could read nothing in their eyes, I pulled the trigger.

I held out the gun, butt foremost. "Anyone care to play?"

I was surprised by the speed with which Calloway took the gun from my hand. He

spun the cylinder, lifted the barrel, and jerked at the trigger with almost frantic haste. Instead of relief on his face when the firing pin fell on an empty, I was sure I saw disappointment.

But I didn't know how to interpret his act. He knew he was dying, and maybe he'd grown tired of waiting. Or maybe he'd known that the one shell in the gun was a dud. I nodded my thanks to him and took the gun, held it between Four-Ace and Mudge. After a long moment, Mudge took it in his hand.

"I don't think that's a live shell in there," he said. "You've always been a just man, Doctor, and that wouldn't be any kind of justice. I can't believe you'd risk letting an innocent man die, and I'm innocent." He lifted the gun to his head, spun the cylinder. After a moment's hesitation he squeezed the trigger with an almost comical slowness. He gasped with relief and handed the gun back, his face pale and strained.

"Had me worried for a minute there," he smiled stiffly.

Either he was honest, or he was a damn good actor. I didn't know which. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that Dave was no longer fighting a shadowy battle within his mind. He was watching like a hawk the actions of the men before me.

I held out the gun to Four-Ace.

"Odds are five to one," I coaxed as he hesitated. "Higher even than your own wheels."

He looked at the gun as though it were red hot.

"Go ahead," I urged. "The rest of us did. Why should you be different?"

Sweat beaded on Doenig's forehead as he stared at the gun. He looked at me, then at the other two men.

"No!" he said finally, his voice shrill. "Why should I? What do I care what the others did?"

I shrugged. "An act of faith," I said. "Nothing more."

His hand moved out to take the gun, then moved back. He stared at me, trying to see into my mind.

"No!" he whispered. "No!"

At that moment Dave stepped beside me. "You shot my father," he told Four-Ace in a voice that was almost steady. "I aim to beat the hell out of you till you ad-

mit it." He lunged forward, and I had to use all my strength to hold him back. "Wait," I said. "Wait, there's got to be a better way than this."

From Dave's point of view, it looked as though it was the gambler who had the guilty conscience, but Dave didn't know that the bullet in the gun was a dud. I knew, and therefore from my point of view, I was bound to suspect Calloway or Mudge. Calloway hadn't seemed to care much whether he lived or died when he pulled the trigger, but was that because he knew he was doomed? Or because he knew the gun couldn't go off?

Mudge had spoken about me being a just man, and that it wasn't like me to risk letting an innocent man die. But was that shrewd, sharp insight, or did he know, when he pulled the trigger, that there was no risk involved? Doenig alone had reacted with what seemed a normal fear.

I heard a sharp movement behind me and when I whirled I saw that Dave had snatched up his father's other gun, and the gun was pointed at my midriff.

"Give Doenig that gun," he said. "Go

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ahead, give it to him. "I'm not afraid. I know what I'm doing."

I felt the hackles stir on my neck. Not because I was afraid, for the gun Dave was pointing at me contained duds also, but because I had the strange hunch that an answer was going to explode out of this problem soon. A gunsmoke answer.

"Go ahead," Dave repeated. "Make him take it!"

I handed Doenig the gun, and this time his fingers closed on the butt because now Dave's gun was levelled at his heart. The next moment Dave's open palm slapped down on the lamp chimney, and the room was plunged into darkness.

No one moved, and I don't think anyone breathed.

I heard a cylinder snap open, and I heard bullets drop one by one to the floor till I had counted five. "That makes us even, Doenig," Dave said, and now his voice was steady.

"Even," I thought. "One bullet each. Both duds . . ."

"As soon as I close my gun," Dave was saying, "I'm going to begin firing. You shot my father, Doenig, and now it's either you or me!"

The cylinder snapped into place, and I heard a hammer fall on an empty.

"Go ahead, Doenig," Dave taunted, "start pulling that trigger, so I'll know where you are!" His gun clicked again.

"I think I can see you now," Dave said, "and I think the next one's the good one!"

"Wait!" Doenig screamed, without dropping his hammer once. "This gun can't fire!"

I heard metal clash to the floor as Doenig dropped the useless gun, and I reached wildly into my bureau drawer, knowing what would happen next. But before my

groping fingers found steel, I heard the ominous *swish* of Doenig's hand reaching beneath his coat for his hideout gun. The next instant a slender, tense form brushed past me, and the next gun thunder blasted.

The two shots had blended so closely into one that with the echoes roaring in my ears, I couldn't be sure if two shots had actually been fired, or only one.

"Dave," I said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right," a weak voice answered. A voice so faint that I was sure the boy had been hit.

Somehow I managed to find matches and light the lamp. Dave was all right. Across the room Doenig lay dead with a bullet between his eyes, and in front of Dave, at his feet, with the gun still smoking in his hand, Calloway lay dying.

I lifted his head, and Mudge bent to help me, but I saw that it was too late.

"Catherine's boy," Calloway said weakly. "Could have been mine . . . That's what it adds up. That's what you couldn't see. I couldn't kill the father of Cathy's boy. I got Doenig though." He smiled a little smile of triumph, and then let his head sink back, content to die.

Across the room I heard a restless stirring, and then Bill Ordway's voice spoke in a weak whisper. "What's this? What's going on?"

"A gun cub's baptism," I said, leading Dave over to him. I was pretty sure what Bill would say next. It was always the same each time I dug lead out of his ornery hide.

But he waited a long moment before he said it to look proudly at his son, and when he spoke his words had a new, a deeper meaning. "After eating smoke," he said, "I get powerful thirsty. Besides, this calls for a celebration. Doc, you old walrus, break out a drink!"

PLUTOCRATIC PILOTS

Steamboat pilots on the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers received anywhere from \$500 to \$1,200 per month for their services. They were skilled men, few in number, highly in demand. Many, understandably cocky and independent, often dictated their own terms and conditions, were seldom turned down. Pilots' earnings far outstripped those of the other members of the crew, which usually numbered 60 to 65 men, including seven officers. Deck hands (about 40) and firemen (about 8) received \$50 per month; officers received from \$100 to \$200 per month, the captain, \$300.

—J. W. Q.

He started spraying lead
in my direction.



Two Texas curly-wolves, aiming to
sack a prize, didn't figure on a foxy
cow bunny.

APRON STRING NOOSE

By HARRISON COLT

KATE BRANDON was setting the table for the noon meal when she heard the clatter of hooves outside the kitchen door. She hastily set out another plate and cup, hearing again her father's soft, drawling voice in town yesterday. "Reckon I'll be droppin' in on you and Mark one of these days for a home-cooked meal. A man sure gets mighty sick and tired of the hogwash that ornery Chink dishes out in his restaurant."

Smiling warmly, she hurried to the door. But her smile faded somewhat as she saw the two horsemen who had halted before the ranchhouse gallery. They were an unsavory looking pair, clothes powdered with the dust and grime of a long stretch in the saddle. Their faces were shadowed with a thick stubble of beard.

"This where Mark Brandon lives?" asked the younger man. He was a sallow-faced, long-nosed man and he stared at her with a sharp insolence in his eyes.

Kate nodded. "You want to see my husband?"

Again it was the younger man who spoke. "Yeah," he said carelessly. "We was aimin' to see your husband. He home?"

Some deep, nameless instinct made Kate hesitate. She couldn't say why, but for a brief moment she felt an odd uneasiness crawl along her spine. She gave herself a little shake. There she went again, imagining things. Why, anybody could see that these were just a pair of forty-dollar-a-month cowhands. Probably looking for work. She said pleasantly:

"Mark's down at the barn right now, but he'll be coming up to the house in a few minutes. Won't you light down and eat with us? You can wash up down at the—"

"Right kind of yuh, ma'am," broke in the long-nosed man. He directed a half-amused look at his companion and both of them swung down. "Frank," he said, "I'll stay here. You take the horses down to the barn."

Frank let his gaze move from the younger man to the girl and back again. A frown creased his fleshy face and he started to say something, then decided not to. Turning, he led the horses away toward the barn.

The long-nosed man followed Kate into the kitchen. He pulled up a chair and sat down at the table. "Kind of a surprise to find Brandon married," he remarked. "When'd this happen?"

Kate felt a touch of warmth come into her cheeks. "We've been married four months."

"Some gents have all the luck."

Kate glanced up. She supposed it was meant as a compliment, yet it hadn't the sound of a compliment. There was envy in the man's tone and even a hint of resentment.

For a while, there was silence in the kitchen. Kate busied herself around the stove.

"We're from the same part of the country your husband comes from," the man said finally.

"Clayburn County, Texas?" She stared back over her shoulder in surprise. "That's queer. You don't talk like a

Texan. You don't talk like Mark does."

"Noticed that, eh?" A slow smile moved across the fallow features. "Fact is, I was raised in Kansas. Didn't move down to Texas 'til I was nigh onto eighteen."

After that the man asked more questions about Mark. Kate, her vague sense of alarm persisting, replied cautiously, told him little.

Presently the scrape of boots sounded on the gallery outside. Mark came through the door, the second stranger at his heels. The look on Mark's face warned the girl, even before she saw the gun in the stout man's hand.

Mark gave her a concerned glance and said quickly, "Now, Kate. No need to get worked up. Seems these two gents have made a little mistake. Got me mixed up with some other feller named Brandon."

"He says he ain't from Texas at all," said the man with the gun, addressing his partner. His voice was a raspy, throaty whisper. "Claims he's from New Mexico and never was in Clayburn County."

A slow smile seeped across the other's features and he gave the girl a sly, half-taunting glance. But as his eyes shifted to her husband, the smile faded.

"He's the one we're lookin' for," he stated flatly. "I got that much out of the girl. He's from Clayburn County all right, and he come up here about seven, eight months ago. It all fits in."

THE older man had tiny eyes that kept jerking nervously in his head. Now they settled on Mark's face and stayed there. "You know who we are?"

Mark said slowly, "I reckon I got a pretty good idea. Ain't you a couple of gents who used to ride with Big Nose Charley?"

"Sure," grunted the man. "I'm Frank Calhoun. And my partner's Snake Bailey. You heard of us?"

The names had a familiar ring to Kate. She knew she'd heard them before, although she wasn't quite sure in what connection. And Big Nose Charley—she was certain she'd heard her father mention him at some time or other.

Mark said, "I've heard of you."

"Well," snarled the fallow-faced Bailey, "we heard of you, too. You're the hom-

bre that shot Big Nose Charley full of holes! Ain't that right?"

Kate saw no fear on her husband's face. But there was a shadow of concern in his eyes whenever his glance strayed in her direction. He began to talk.

"Big Nose was diggin' up a canvas sack when I stumbled onto him in them hills north of my ranch. I was huntin' strays at the time. When I rode up, he pulled a gun and started sprayin' lead in my direction. I did the only thing I could. I hit the dirt and returned his fire. It happened I was lucky. At that, I reckon I was doin' you boys a favor. Big Nose wouldn't have been there alone if he wasn't pullin' a double-cross. You don't figger he was goin' to cut you two in on the twenty thousand dollars of bank money in that sack, do you?"

"Look, mister," broke in Snake Bailey, "we didn't come here on account of what you done to Big Nose Charley. If you hadn't settled his hash, we'd likely have done it ourselves. What we're interested in is that canvas sack."

"The bank money?" Mark Brandon looked surprised. "I turned that over to the sheriff, of course."

The two men looked at each other. Then Calhoun said, angrily, "If that's so, why wasn't there no mention of it in the papers at the time of the shootin'?"

"He's lyin'!" snarled the sharp-faced Bailey.

Mark shook his head. "No. It's the truth. I did turn the money over to the sheriff. He insisted that nothing should be said about the recovered money because he knew that Big Nose was only one of the gang that stole it. He had an idea the others might come sniffin' around if they thought the money was still there. He and his deputies spent most of the next month layin' in wait for someone to show up."

Calhoun was frowning. "He could be tellin' the truth, Snake," he admitted reluctantly.

"You gone soft in the head?" scoffed Bailey. His pale eyes held a savage glitter. "Didn't he lie before—about not comin' from Texas? Hell, I bet that money's hid right here in the house!"

Calhoun was silent. He licked his lips thoughtfully. "Maybe you're right, Snake. Come to think of it, there must have been

some reason fer him to sell his place in such a hurry right afterwards and move up north here."

"I'll tell you why," said Mark. "I'd met a girl I liked. I decided to move up here and court her. Try to talk her into marryin' me. As things turned out, she did." He nodded toward Kate.

"Ain't that nice?" growled Snake Bailey. "You know what I think? I think—"

Calhoun cut in excitedly, "Snake, someone's comin'!" The stout man was staring out of the window, eyes jerking in alarm as he squinted up the side road leading to the ranch buildings.

SNAKE BAILEY scowled blackly, stepped to the door and peered carefully at the approaching horseman. He muttered bitterly. "He's got a star on his vest! Of all the damn luck! I told you we shouldn't have gone near that town. Now we got the law on our trail. Probably recognized us from descriptions on 'em damn reward posters."

Calhoun's eyes jumped nervously about the kitchen. "What do we do now, Snake?"

The long-nosed man turned away from the door and stared at the girl and Mark with narrowed calculation in his pale eyes. "Frank," he said, "take Brandon in the other room. If he makes a sound, you know what to do."

Calhoun looked at him nervously. "What about the girl?"

A faint flicker of humor stirred in the shallow features of the younger man. He lifted the six-gun from his belt and hefted it suggestively. "Why, she's goin' to get rid of the lawman for us," he said slyly. "She's goin' to tell him we was here but that we rode away again and that Brandon went with us."

"What if she won't do it?"

Bailey's grin widened. "She will. Because she knows that if she makes a move to warn him in any way, I'll be watchin' her from in back of these curtains and I'll shoot him straight through the heart. You wouldn't like to have a man's blood on your conscience, would you, honey?"

KATE'S shoulders felt stiff and the back of her neck ached. Her mouth was dry and she had to form the words

several times before any sound came from her lips. "I—I'll send him away," she managed finally.

Through the open door she saw the horseman ride up and tie his large buckskin to one of the gallery spots. Then he moved up onto the porch with quick strides and paused in the doorway. He was a big rangy man in his fifties, heavy-shouldered, with iron-grey hair.

"Lo, Kate," his voice boomed. "I rode out from town to—"

"I think I know why you're here, Mr. Trent."

The man's bushy brows lifted slightly, and he gave the girl a sharp, searching glance. "You do, eh?"

"You wanted to see Mark. Or was it those two strangers you had business with? Anyhow, you're too late. They all rode off half an hour ago. I think they were headin' for Dad's place."

The big man with the star pinned to his vest stared at her thoughtfully a moment. "Oh," he said slowly. "Your father's place, eh?" His glance moved around the kitchen, resting for a moment on the table.

"I'd invite you to sit down and eat, sheriff, but I realize you must be in a hurry."

"Yeah," said the big man. "Much obliged, Kate. I'll be seein' you."

After he had mounted and ridden off, Bailey came back into the kitchen. He holstered his gun, a sly smile of satisfaction on his sallow face, then stood at the window until the big lawman had disappeared from sight over a ridge to the north of the house.

Calhoun had brought Mark Brandon back into the kitchen. His hands had been tied behind him with a strip of rawhide.

Bailey turned to the girl. "I liked the way you got rid of that lawman. Handled it real neat, you did. And you showed you got good sense, too." He paused and looked over at Mark Brandon. "Now, if your husband will just show the same kind of good sense and tell us where he's got that bank loot hid—?"

Mark said, "I turned that money over to the sheriff. That's the truth."

Calhoun's eyes were jerking nervously. "What you think, Snake? Shall we look around fer the stuff?"

Bailey's pale eyes blazed. "No. We ain't got time for that. Brandon's gonna tell us where it is!"

Snake Bailey struck with a side-winder's suddenness. His fist caught Mark on the side of the jaw and spilled him back against the wall. The rancher lost his balance and slipped to the floor. Kate gave a frightened cry and would have rushed to him if Calhoun hadn't gripped her roughly by the arm and held her.

Mark arose slowly. His eyes were angry and a trickle of blood crawled from one corner of his mouth. Bailey's face wore a cruel grin. He said, "That's only a sample, mister. My partner and I know plenty of ways to make a man talk. Injun ways. You'll save yourself a lot of grief if you speak your piece now."

Mark Brandon made no reply. His silence awoke a furious gleam in Snake Bailey's pale eyes. He reached down and pulled a knife from his boot. Then he walked over to the stove, removed a lid, thrust the blade down into the flames.

"You changed your mind yet?" he asked Mark.

Mark remained silent. He eyed the gun in Calhoun's hand, and Kate knew he was estimating his chances of leaping across the room onto his tormentors. She could see the muscles in his shoulders and arms grow taut with his effort to free his hands from the rawhide thong that bound them.

Suddenly it happened. The throng loosened, and Mark jerked one hand free. Calhoun cried out nervously, "Look out, Snake! He's got his hands loose!"

Bailey looked up, his mouth twisting scornfully. "What you worryin' about? You got a gun, ain't you?"

As he spoke he lifted the knife from the stove, its tip glittering redly, and turned toward the rancher. The hard, cruel smile was still on his lips. Kate could see Mark set himself for a desperate rush at the two men and her blood seemed to freeze in her veins. She tried to cry out but no sound came.

Then a voice spoke quietly behind her. "Don't move, gents! Just open your fingers and let that hardware fall! Careful now!"

The gun fell from Calhoun's seemingly

(Please continue on page 98)

SAGE-HEN SAGA

By HAROLD NEITHAMMER

I STARED at Jim White through the rippled heat waves that pulsed over the seared earth. The man would die out here. He didn't know the desert as I knew it—but he realized that it had him beaten. The bitter knowledge was there, staring thinly out of his blood-shot gray eyes—and I was glad. When a man runs off with another man's wife, like Jim White did, he deserves to die.

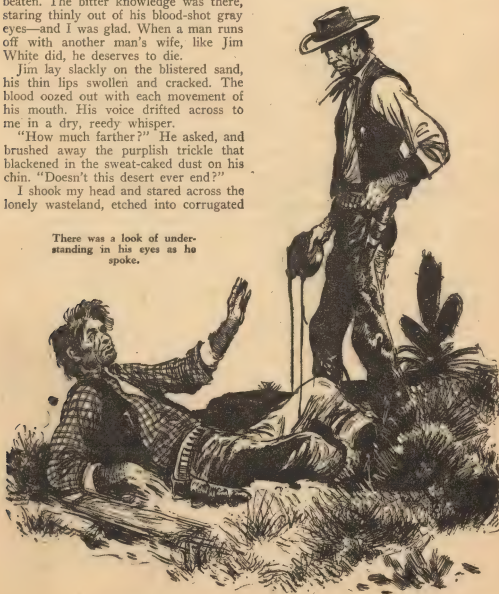
Jim lay slackly on the blistered sand, his thin lips swollen and cracked. The blood oozed out with each movement of his mouth. His voice drifted across to me in a dry, reedy whisper.

"How much farther?" He asked, and brushed away the purplish trickle that blackened in the sweat-caked dust on his chin. "Doesn't this desert ever end?"

I shook my head and stared across the lonely wasteland, etched into corrugated

*Bitter hatred was the only bond
between the two desert rats.*

There was a look of understanding in his eyes as he spoke.



layers by the last violent gale that had ripped ruthlessly across it.

"Not for us," I answered him as I peered at the tall cacti, their bristling arms uplifted to the sun. "For us, it has no end." I knew my voice had a gloating sound. He had qualities that made it hard for me to keep on hating him—but he had to die. It had taken me a year to find him. I didn't intend to have him escape me now.

For a moment he lay there silent, the small shadow his lax body made shrinking under him. I could almost read the thoughts going around in his mind.

"I've never believed in fate," he said at last, "but it almost seems as if this was meant to be; first one canteen springing a leak, then the other, and finally our horses getting loose and wandering off. Those things are hard to understand." He looked full at me as he said it.

"Let him look," I thought. "He doesn't know. He can only guess." I had planned it very carefully. He deserved everything he was getting. There was only one thing I did not understand. When I had found him Ruth wasn't with him—but I hadn't inquired into that. I didn't want to arouse his suspicions. He had wanted to cross the desert to Sandy Flats. I had offered to guide him. I intended to see that he never reached there.

"Bill," he said slowly, a wistful look in his tired eyes, "I want you to leave me here. You know the desert. I hope you can get out. Before you go—will you do something for me?"

I DIDN'T answer immediately. He had given me an out. I wanted him to die out here on the desert—but I didn't want to watch him while he was doing it. I was all mixed up inside. For a year I had carried a bitter hatred inside of me, festering and growing. Now it was dying. I felt worse. If he had only been the kind of man that I could keep on hating. . . .

"What do you want?" I asked roughly.

"I want you to pass on what I am going to tell you to a man in Sandy Flats." He sat up, his shoulders drooping. "I met a woman there over a year ago. I saw her as I got off the stage. She was beautiful. I stayed in town for three days—and when I left she was on the stage, too.

Two days later we were married." He laughed bitterly. "I didn't know she already had a husband."

"If she didn't tell you, somebody in town must have put you wise." I said ironically. It had been from a friend of mine that I had found out Jim's name and what he looked like.

Jim shook his head. "Those local people clam up around strangers." He paused to watch some buzzards circling slowly overhead. They were coming closer—ever closer. He noticed it, and it was as if a veil had been drawn over his tired eyes.

I knew his thoughts weren't pleasant, but for over a year mine hadn't been, either. I let him sweat it out.

Finally he wiped the blood from his lips and poked one sun-blackened finger aimlessly around in the sand. "We traveled a lot," he said. "I took her wherever she wanted to go—until my money ran out." He laughed harshly. "It was a long honeymoon—but it had a rough ending."

"If it did I reckon you deserved it," I said.

"Could be," Jim White said listlessly, like it didn't matter any more. "It was then she told me she already had a husband. Two of them, in fact." He came to life suddenly. His fingers plowed through the sand with savage force.

"She left them both after she got their money. She did the same with me—but she won't do that to anyone else." His lips split wide open as his mouth angled downward with the bitter intensity of his thoughts.

A different picture of Ruth was unfolding before me. Not really a different Ruth. Only a side of her character I had been too blind to see before. Her every gesture and word had been done with a single motive—money. I'd made a lot of it. It was gone—all gone.

But there was still pain when I thought of her. Memories die slowly. Not suddenly like death. I could feel the gnawing edge of my feelings in my voice. "You said she wouldn't do the same to anyone else. Why did you say that?" I had to know.

"She left me like she did the others. She rode out on the stage alone. But she overlooked the fact that the Apaches were

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Next

Published

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

issue

March 10th

HOWDY, Folks . . . Our big feature for next month is "High-Tail—or Hang!" by Robert Martin—the story of the strangest job Gunslick Blue Roark had ever taken. Big Gus Halloway hired Roark to break up his son's romance with a sultry half-breed who schemed to marry young Dave Halloway for his inheritance.



Blue Roark arrived in Beau City one night, and as he walked down the street looking for Boss Halloway, a bright flame cracked at him from out of the shadows. His reputation had preceded him!



The next day, after getting his orders from Halloway, he set out to find Dolores. He discovered that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen—but as deadly as sin and twice as dangerous.



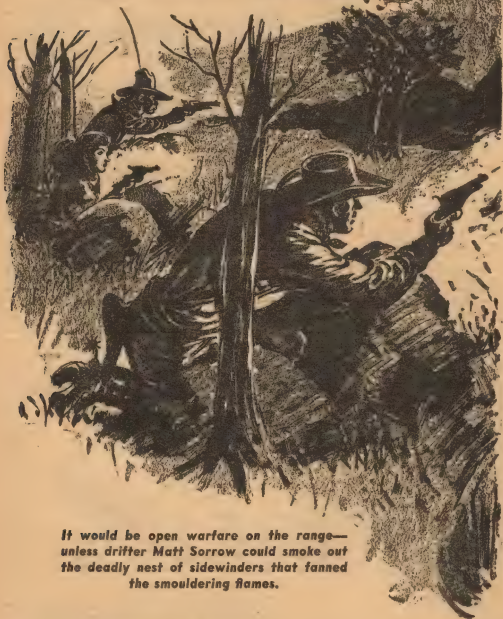
Young Dave Halloway's eyes blazed, his gun hand poised, as he stepped into the room and found Roark's arm around her slender waist and saying, "Why fool with a kid when there're men around?"



That was cause for guns blasting "High-Tail—or Hang!" Roark reported to his big-shot boss, disregarding the gun, as he leaped for the rancher's legs! The complete story will appear in the April issue.

GUNSLICK . . . FOR A DAY

Smashing Novelette of Black Conspiracy



*It would be open warfare on the range—
unless drifter Matt Sorrow could smoke out
the deadly nest of sidewinders that fanned
the smouldering flames.*

By MARVIN DE VRIES



The fight flared up to a wild banshee racket.

CHAPTER

1

Trouble Trail

Matt Sorrow had no reason to stop at the Triangle Dot, except that the sun was going down, and he could use a cool drink of water, and, maybe, a bit of grub, if they turned out to be hospitable people. He had no reason to stop, except that when a man has set out on a trail, and lost it through time and distance, he's apt to stop here and there, and pass the time of day, and something he hears by sheerest chance may set him on the trail again. A chance stone rolling down a hillside kills more snakes than get tromped by the man who is looking for them.

It was a small place, standing on the

edge of Crazy Horse Valley. The lady of the house appeared to be the only one at home, and she turned out to be so cranky he was lucky to get even his drink of water. She came outside, shrill and sputtering, and wanted to know what he meant by showing up at this time of day when she had expected him before noon. Obviously, she mistook him for someone else, but she was so cranky he didn't bother to correct her.

"Better late than never," he remarked. "I don't reckon there's any harm done, is there?"

"If you're as slow with a gun as you are getting here, Faro, you won't do me much good," she snapped. She was tall and angular, and her eyes had a cold steely look that took him in from head to foot, and lashed him with contempt.

Finally, he said: "The only reason I stopped at all was for a drink."

"I don't allow liquor on this place," she stated, puckering her thin lips, righteously. "I warn you not to show up drunk while I'm paying your wages."

"I mean water," Matt said, mildly. A hen-pecked outfit, he thought, and from the looks of things the men-folks stay away as much as they can.

"Get it at the well," she told him. "Then you can ride on to the Box F. I expect you've been told what's wanted?"

Matt shook his head. "No, I wouldn't know exactly."

"We've got a man on the Box F now. His name's Tid Manger, and you'll take orders from him. He's spoken to Faraway about you. They're short-handed, and the job's waiting. You'll get regular wages from the Box F, and I'll make up the balance to a hundred and fifty."

"A hundred and fifty!" Matt exclaimed.

"That's all I'll pay," she snapped. "Take it, or leave it."

Most of this was meaningless to Matt. He was playing along in a part the woman had put him into, the part of a man named Faro, and he wouldn't set her right because she was mean and cranky. But he understood a hundred and fifty a month. Those were gun wages, and she thought she was talking to a gun hand she had hired on, with a chore to do at the Box F. When she found out where she

had put her foot, he had no idea what kind of a caper she would cut, so he figured he better ride on.

"And don't show up around here again unless you're called," she warned.

"It ain't likely," he muttered under his breath, and rode off.

Thinking back on this conversation, he realized it had some serious implications. This woman was up to something against the Box F. That much was plain. What kind of a play it might be he couldn't guess. Certainly, the Triangle Dot must be something different than it looked to pay a man the wages she had mentioned. He had half a notion to ride over to the Box F, and look into it, although he had no idea where the Box F was. He was a stranger here. He had his heart set on making town, so he could grain his horse, and get some restaurant food for himself. Come morning, he could make up his mind what to do, to let it go as a little fun he had had, or make work of it.

He rode down into the valley, and followed the trail along Crazy Horse Creek. His horse, a big sorrel gelding, hugged the edge of the trail to chase flies, and Matt patiently ducked the twigs. He was about to say something about it, however, when he heard another rider approaching and let it go, although it was some time before he got a look at him. When he did it turned him sour, because the rider looked like a gun-hawk, and Matt would have bet his bottom dollar this was Faro riding at him. The man was cheap and flashy. When they came side by side on the trail the man pulled up and asked the way to Triangle Dot.

"You'll find it up the slope there," Matt said, pointing, "but I wouldn't ride in right now, Faro."

The man jumped, and his eyes narrowed. "I guess you got the advantage."

"Don't let it worry you."

"Why wouldn't you ride in if you was me."

"You won't like it."

"Anything else?"

"No, except I noticed a posse percolatin' around."

FARO rode on, and Matt had no way of knowing whether he had scared him off, or not. His grin widened. Maybe it

was carrying a joke too far, but, from what he had heard, it didn't seem like any harm could come from spooking a gunhawk off a gun-chore.

He rode on for some time into the westering sun, watching it flatten out on the horizon, and go down in red flame. He noticed a big ranchhouse to his right, which he figured might be the Box F. It was low and rambling, and set in a grove of trees, and the grass looked bright and green all around it. A little later he saw another one, just as big and pretentious, on the opposite slope. That's the life, he thought, big and bossy, and not a trouble in the world, although I expect the two of them fight like cats and dogs.

He got a sample of what he was thinking, a little later. He was back in the willows when he saw two horsemen coming toward him, riding side by side, with the thin trickle of Crazy Horse Creek between them.

Both of the men rode fine horses, one a palomino, the other a trigueno with stockings almost to its knees. The one on the palomino was dark-skinned, and dark-haired, the other was blond and blue-eyed. They looked about eighteen or nineteen, and were having a hot argument about something the blond claimed he had heard in town—that Tid Manger, a Box F puncher, had been throwing some mighty loose talk around about the Box F losing stock to the Lightning L.

"You better tell that cowpoke to keep his mouth shut, or I'll fill it with a lot of loose teeth," the blond flared.

"You and who else?" the dark-skinned rider inquired, his eyes smokey, his tongue rolling along his cheek.

The black-haired rider was Shane Faraway, the other Bub Locobo, Matt discovered from their talk. The Faraways owned the Box F, the Locobos the Lightning L, and Crazy Horse Creek was the dividing line between the two places. The argument went on endlessly, all built up from what Tid Manger, the crooked Box F puncher, had let drop in town. They had pulled up, and were facing each other across the creek, arguing and shaking their fists.

"That settles it," Shane Faraway yelled, finally. "After this, don't you ever set foot on this side of the creek

again. I mean it, so just remember."

Young Locobo snorted with disdain. "I will if I want to."

"Just try it. I dare you. I'll shoot you outa your saddle, Bub. I surely will."

"You ain't got the guts to use a shoot-in' iron, Shane."

"Just try it, that's all."

Bub Locobo didn't try. He stayed on his side, but he worked his mouth for a second, and then spat across the creek onto forbidden ground. The way he did it made a loud noise that sounded insulting.

Shane Faraway's face went white, his eyes flashed fury, and his hand went for his gun.

The grin came off Matt Sorrow's face, and he moved fast to keep them from unloading weapons at each other. He jumped his horse out of the brush, and covered them both with his gun. "Reach, both of you," he snapped. "Get 'em up—way up."

Shane Faraway swore. Bub Locobo glared. But both of them got their hands up.

"Now travel," Matt went on, "each your own way. Augurin' about the damndest truck. I'll spit on both sides of the creek if I got a mind to."

He did, first on one side, then the other, deliberately turning their wrath on himself so it would cool off between them. He figured they were friends, who needed a little help getting out of the fix they had worked themselves into.

It worked, too, only it worked a little better than he figured on. Shane Faraway made the first move, lifting his palomino straight up, like a trick horse, then driving it in on its hind legs. Matt dodged, to keep out of reach of clawing hoofs, throwing himself on one stirrup, the other leg pulled up. Then the other rider jumped in, and butted him off his horse.

Matt sprawled flat, and lost his gun. The dark-haired hellion left his horse, and came at him grinning crookedly. He waited for Matt to get to his feet, then took a quick poke. The blow bonged through Matt's head like a bell, and he went down again.

"Next time," Shane told him, "you wait till you get off Box F range to spit,

see? Or I'll really poke you one."

Matt jumped up, and landed a punch square on the nose. Shane didn't let go his crooked grin, but his nose gushed blood, splattering over his fine clothes, and his dark, shining face. He couldn't touch Matt again, but he tried until his wind was gone.

Then he backed off, and gave Bub Locobo a turn.

"You can't do that, you hellions," Matt protested.

"You just watch if we can," Bub answered, and went after him.

They switched like that three times, wearing him down until he could hardly move. They had him staggering around in crazy circles, his legs buckling every time he took a step, his breath wheezing out of him like a steam whistle, his chest ripping wide open with pain every time he tried to get some air inside of him, his hands pawing limply at thin air, his eyes glazing over. Finally, he sank down to the ground in a limp heap, and called it quits.

He heard them ride away, friends again, leaving his horse tied to a willow, his gun close at hand.

Matt lay there for some time, filling his lungs with cool air, uncramping his fists, getting the kinks out of his legs. *Creeping jeepers*, he thought, *I keep them from shooting each other's brains out, and this is what I get for butting into other peoples affairs.*

Shortly before dark, another pair of riders came up the trail. They were girls, one dark, the other blonde, and it would have been an easy guess to name them sisters to the two moon-heads with whom he had just had the ruckus. They were both pretty, but Matt liked the dark one best. She was slim as a boy, and had the same dark features Shane Faraway possessed. They were having an argument, too, just as heated as their brothers.

"Well, if Tid Manger said it, it's probably true," the dark-haired girl stated. "The word of a Box F puncher is good enough for me."

"Why, Linda Faraway, how dare you?" the other flared.

"Oh, no," Matt Sorrow exploded, pushing himself to his feet, "let's not go over all that again."

CHAPTER 2 *Bushwhacker's Fiesta*

Linda Faraway probably guessed exactly what had happened, but she made a remark to the effect that she couldn't see how anyone could come to grief like that if he were just riding along minding his own business.

"I wasn't," Matt admitted. "I was minding two other jigadees' business. They took me on by turns till I couldn't see straight."

"Where did they go?"

"Right on up the creek. But I will say this for myself—they were both going for their guns when I butted in. I expect they're brothers of yours. You look alike."

"One of them is my brother," Linda said. "The dark-haired one riding the palomino. The other is Bub Locobo. He's Clara's brother. They get into some awful arguments."

Matt rode with her to the Box F, suddenly making up his mind to find out more about Tid Manger, and the Triangle Dot. Linda said the name of the woman he had talked to was Belle Keiger. Her husband's name was Ford. They had been up there a year, keeping to themselves, bothering no one, and trying not to be bothered. Linda had paid them a neighborly call, but she had gotten such a cold welcome she hadn't tried it again.

Darkness was finding its way into the valley, but the higher slopes were still rimmed with light. Suddenly they heard the spang of gun-fire. It came from the direction of the creek, some distance upstream from the spot where Matt Sorrow had the hard luck of meeting up with Bub Locobo and Shane Faraway.

"Were they still arguing when they left you?" Linda asked, frowning.

Matt shook his head. "No, but it might've broke out again. Maybe they argue for the fun of it, but what I saw looked serious. I reckon we ought to ride down there."

She swung her horse, and Matt followed. He figured two shots had been fired, one on top of the other, although it might have been only one, with an echo to make it sound like two. Once Linda pulled up, and called her brother's name,

but she didn't get an answer. Before they reached the creek trail another rider came down the slope, and gave them a hail. It was Ford Keiger, Linda said. He was a seedy-looking, stoop-shouldered man of middle age, riding a boney black nag. He had a spare horse in tow, and said he had heard the shot while he was at his chores. The horse had come to his place a little later, empty-saddled. He told them it got him worried, so he came down to have a look.

They found Bub Locobo face-down on the trail near the creek with a bullet hole in his back. He was badly hurt, and had lost a lot of blood, but he wasn't dead. His gun was near his hand, as if he had let it drop when he fell. It hadn't been fired.

"We'll take him to our place," Linda said. "That's closest."

"I got a spring wagon you could use," Keiger offered. "He shouldn't be roughed around much."

"That would be just the thing," Matt said.

Linda stayed with Bub Locobo, and Matt went with Keiger to fetch the wagon. He figured Keiger's wife wasn't likely to come outside, but even if she did she wouldn't be apt to recognize him in the dark. There were several men in the bunkhouse when they rode into the yard. Matt saw them through the grimy window, but none of them came outside, and Keiger didn't call them. He had his harness handy, and groped around in the dark, hitching the team.

"I don't expect you'll need me, will you?" he asked.

"I cin make out. I'll get the team back."

THEY were almost finished hitching when Belle Keiger came out with a lantern. Keiger told her what had happened. Matt stayed on the far side of the team, fussing with a trace. He kept his head down. She didn't pay any attention to his horse. It looked almost black at night, so she wouldn't recognize it.

Matt was glad to get away, and hurried the team down the slope, his riding horse tied to the end gate.

The wagon had weak springs. Every time he went over a bump, something clattered and jangled in the box behind him, and he finally reached over the back-rest, and got hold of it. It felt like a piece of jewelry, the size of a silver dollar, but thinner, with a design on both sides. He could feel the rough etching with his fingers. A length of fine chain dangled from a hole bored through the solid medallion. It probably belonged to Belle Keiger. More than likely it was her only piece of finery. The chain was too fine for the size of the locket, and had probably broken at some time or other while she was riding in the wagon, and the locket had dropped into the wagon box. He put it in his pocket, and prodded his horses to a faster lope.

When he reached the creek, Linda said Bub Locobo had stirred once, and muttered something, but she couldn't make out what it was. Matt got the wagon in close, and let down the tail-gate. "You better get in the wagon," he told Linda. "Boost him along when I get him in."

Matt managed as carefully as he could. Later, he remembered he heard a noise in the bushes behind him, closer to the creek, but he didn't pay any attention because he



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had his hands full. He got the limp figure partly onto the wagon, and Linda was leaning over to help, when he heard the sound again. Then a gun blasted, and he felt the bullet thud into Bub Locobo's body. The bushes swished and snapped again, water splashed, and footsteps thudded away.

Matt spun, and saw the crouching figure cross the creek. He fired a shot, but it was a clean miss because Linda gave him a sudden push, and spoiled his aim. He went across the creek, and got another chance, just as the man was climbing his horse. He went to the ground with a hard thud, and his gun blasted again. He fired two more shots. The man let out a choked yelp, and didn't move again.

Linda screamed, but stayed in the wagon box. Matt moved in cautiously, and kicked the gun out of reach. The man was dead. All three shots showed their marks. One of them had left a gaping hole in the side of the bushwhacker's head. He straightened up, and went back to the wagon.

Linda was sitting in the wagon box beside Bub Locobo, her hands over her eyes, her shoulders slumped with woe. She wouldn't turn when he touched her shoulder.

"It's all right," he told her. "I don't blame you for giving me a push."

"I couldn't help it," she sobbed. "He's my brother—"

"No," Matt said, "he's not your brother. He's a jigger by the name of Faro."

Shane Faraway didn't come home that night, but no one so much as mentioned it. A Box F rider got Doc Barstow from Comanche House during the night. Another got Sam Locobo, Bub's father, and a third rode clear to Morganville for another medico in case Doc Barstow needed help. Bub Locobo lived through the long dark hours. If anyone noticed Shane's absence, he didn't inquire.

Sam came down for breakfast coffee, after spending the night by his son's side. "I'm going home and fetch Clara so she can do for him," he announced. "She won't be no bother to you."

Mrs. Faraway said it wasn't necessary, but when she saw it would suit him better she said they would be glad to have her help.

THE sheriff rode in during the morning, and talked to Matt Sorrow. He said he had a dodger on Faro Farley in his office. He was wanted for murder and bank robbery, and Matt was in line for a reward of five hundred dollars.

"I can't understand why Faro tried to kill Bub," Matt said, cautiously.

"I don't know," the sheriff said. "I hear they done some gambling in town yesterday—Bub and Shane, and this jasper. I reckon that's where the trouble started."

"I reckon," Matt agreed.

"By the way, where is Shane?"

"I don't know," Matt said, guardedly. "I haven't seen him around this morning."

"Tell him I want to see him next time he's in town, will you, so I cin make a report. I got to go now."

"I'll do that," Matt agreed, and watched him ride off. There was a worried frown on his forehead. He was convinced by now that Belle Keiger had recognized him while he was helping Keiger hitch the team, and had sent Faro down to bushwhack him, that the bullet that thudded into Bub Locobo's body when he was trying to get him into the wagon was meant for him. The team was slow, and Faro would have had plenty time to get his bushwhack trap set. Belle Keiger had discovered the mistake she had made talking with him just before sun-down, and had tried to remedy it. The Keigers had nothing to do with the rest of it. Minute by minute, hour by hour, Shane Faraway was giving proof that he had shot Bub Locobo, and the longer he stayed away the worse it would get. If he came home soon enough, it was in Matt's hands to shield, or expose him, and what he would do when the time came, he didn't know. "If Bub pulls through I reckon I'll let it ride," he told himself, "but if he doesn't, I don't know. In any case, he better get here fast."

Ross Faraway, Shane's father, finally brought it out into the open. He was thin and tall, and had once been a cavalry officer, and still carried himself with military erectness. He and Sam Locobo had come to this valley about the same time, and built up their spreads on opposite sides of Crazy Horse Creek, with a minimum of

friction, although there had always been a sharp, friendly rivalry between them. Matt had seen him head into the barn when the sheriff showed up, and now he came out again and joined Matt at the corral.

"Did he say anything about Shane?" he asked, his eyes suddenly going tired.

"He came out to say I got a reward coming," Matt answered. "He did ask where Shane was, but I told him I hadn't seen him around this morning. It didn't seem to worry him any. I don't think he's got any idea Shane run off."

Ross Faraway brushed his hand across his face. "They were good friends. He ought to come home."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea."

"Maybe something's happened to him, too."

"His horse would come back, wouldn't it?"

"Yes." He let his breath go in a long sigh. "I'm sure he didn't do it."

Matt heard the creak of a buckboard coming into the yard, and glanced up. It was Sam Locobo. He had promised to bring Clara, but she wasn't with him. Instead, he had Shane's palomino in tow. Two mounted men rode alongside the buckboard. He maneuvered the buckboard alongside the long low gallery, and got down. He undid the palomino's lead rope, and flung the loose end at one of his riders. Ross Faraway and Matt walked along the gallery toward him.

Sam had an angry scowl on his face. "I expect this is your boy's horse," he snapped.

"Sure it is, Sam," Ross answered. "Where'd you get him, Sam? Is Shane hurt?"

"Not that I know of. He's on the run."

"Oh, no."

"He switched horses with one of my riders over at my Squaw Creek line shack during the night. If that don't show, I don't know what does."

Faraway kept quiet. More talk would only get Sam stirred up all the more. Linda had told her father exactly what had happened, that she and Matt had found Bub Locobo shot in the back, and then, while they were loading him into Keiger's wagon, he had gotten another bushwhack bullet in his ribs. It was rea-

sonable to assume that Faro had fired the first shot, and gotten scared off, coming back later to finish the job. But if it was true, why had Shane run off? "Where's Clara?" he asked, quietly.

"She ain't comin'," Sam snapped. "I'm takin' Bub home."

"You can't do that, Sam. Doc said—"

"I don't give a tinker's dam what doc said. Bub's comin' home."

Doc Barstow must have heard the rumpus going on, and came outside. He repeated his warning that Bub couldn't be moved. "I won't be responsible if you try it, Sam."

"Is he any worse?"

"No, but he will be if you move him. He won't live through it. And you'd better quit stompin' around like an old bull yourself, or you'll git a stroke. Everything's being done for Bub that can be done. Don't go and spoil it."

"He's comin' home," Sam growled, stubbornly. "I don't want him on this place. I don't want no more mix with the Box F of any kind. Come on, boys, we'll go in and get him."

FARAWAY turned white with rage.

Matt thought he would hit Sam in the face, but he stepped back when Sam shoved past, and let him go inside.

"I'll go in, and give 'em a hand so they won't rough him up," Matt offered. "Maybe it would be a good idea if you two moved off, and let him go without another rumpus. Let him cool off before you try to argue with him again."

Doc took Faraway by the arm, but before they took a step Sam and his two riders came back out empty-handed. Mrs. Faraway, tall and determined, her black eyes glinting with anger, was behind them, prodding them along with a .45.

"Forevermore," she sputtered, "haven't you a lick of sense left, Sam? Now you stay outside till I tell you you can come in, do you hear?"

Sam didn't answer.

"Where's Clara?" she went on. "You said you were going to fetch her, and instead you come lollygoggin' around here with a couple of tough gun-hands—"

"We ain't no gun-hands, ma'am," one of the punchers defended himself. "Sam said we'd—"

"Oh, keep still. You all make me tired. What d'you think we're going to do, poison the boy? When he's fit to move, by Doctor Barstow's say-so, you can have him back. Until then he stays here. Do you hear, Sam?"

"I hear," Sam answered, his voice thick with fury.

Mrs. Faraway turned on her husband. "Here's your gun, Ross. Now see that he does what I say."

"I don't want the gun, Mae," Ross said, with a choked sound.

"Why not?"

"Well, he'd start shootin' back if I had it."

"Oh, fiddlesticks! Now climb your rig, Sam, and you two get on your horses, and be on your way. We'll let you know if there's any change, for better or worse." Then she went back inside.

Sam stayed in the buckboard, but he was smouldering with rage. He didn't drive off. His two men lined up, one on each side of him, facing the gallery. Matt's tongue slid along his lips, wetting them. If nothing happened to rile him further, Sam would finally ride away. He was grumbling and growling now, but Ross Faraway had enough sense to let him get it all off his chest. Mrs. Faraway was probably right, doing what she did. There was bad feeling now, but it could mend. If Sam had had his own stubborn way, and had lost his son because of it he would never forgive himself. Or them. This way there was a chance—if Bub pulled through, and if Shane came back, and explained himself.

But then something went wrong. Sam's eyes took on a sudden hard glint, and he stopped his raving and ranting. He made a small inconspicuous motion with one of his hands, and let the reins go. Matt's eyes shifted, and with a sudden dead feeling in the pit of his stomach he saw what Sam had seen. There was a Box F puncher standing behind one of the trees, his gun lined out to cover Sam and his two men. The puncher might have had an idea he was siding his boss, but in reality he was only adding flame to Sam's wrath. Sam was going to take a shot at him, and when he did, the Lightning L and the Box F would be at each others' throats. The man was safe behind the tree. Sam

couldn't hit him, but that wouldn't make any difference. There would be war, and this whole valley would simmer with gunsmoke, and snarl with bushwhack lead, until one or the other, or both, cleared out, and let who wanted take it over.

Sam was ready to make his play, but Matt beat him to it. He pulled his gun with the same fast blur of motion that Belle Keiger claimed hadn't impressed her, and fired at the man behind the tree. The man let out a yelp, and went to the ground, losing his gun as he fell. He stayed there, flattened out, and didn't try to reach it. Matt shoved his gun in his holster, and looked at Sam Locobo. "Sorry," he said.

Sam let out a flat-lipped, mirthless grin. "You saved me some trouble, mister," he conceded. "A heap of trouble." Then he turned on Ross Faraway. "Crazy Horse Creek's always been our line, Faraway. I'm makin' it a deadline. Don't come across it, and I'll stay on my side." Then he picked up his lines, and drove away.

Faraway and Barstow walked along the gallery to Matt, and looked at the man behind the tree. Faraway brushed his face with his hand again. "The fool," he muttered. "I expect he meant well, but—"

"Who is it?" Matt asked.

"His name's Manger," Faraway answered. "Tid Manger."

CHAPTER

3

Bitter Friends

Ross Faraway asked Matt if he wanted to take Keiger's wagon back, or whether he should send someone else.

Matt thought a moment. "I guess you better send someone else," he decided, finally. "I got into a kind of a mixmox with the Keigers. I ran a whizzer on 'em, and I'm just beginning to find out it wasn't funny." Belatedly, he remembered the medallion he had found in the wagon box, and got it out. "Whoever you send, you might have him give this doodad to Mrs. Keiger. I reckon it's hers." He took it out and handed it to Faraway.

Ross Faraway blanched when he saw it. "That's Shane's," he stated, instantly.

Matt noticed now for the first time that the figure on the face was an F in a box. Faraway said a blacksmith they had

once had on the place had emiered down a silver dollar and worked in the design. "Shane's worn it all his life. Where'd you find it?"

"In Keiger's buckboard."

"How on earth could it have gotten in there?"

"I don't know, Mr. Faraway, but I think it would be a good idea for the two of us to ride over and ask them."

On the way, Matt told Faraway what had happened the first time he rode into the Triangle Dot yard, and what she had said about Tid Manger. "She figured I was Faro, and I was to take a job at your place, and take orders from Manger, at a hundred and fifty a month."

"I can't understand it," Faraway muttered, when he was through, "unless they're aiming to steal some stock. I haven't missed any so far."

"But Shane's missing."

"They couldn't have anything to do with that."

"Faro's mixed up in it somehow. Unless he was after me for pulling that trick on Belle. That's what I thought until Sam Locobo came riding in with Shane's horse."

"The Keigers seem to be honest people."

"She wasn't offering me an honest job."

"If Tid Manger's double-crossing me why did he take a stand like he did against Sam Locobo?"

"He wasn't risking his skin any, even if Sam did take a shot at him, because he was behind that tree. But there would have been hell to pay all the same for you and Sam. Maybe that was the whole idea."

"I'll have it out with him when we get back."

"There's one more thing I've been thinking about. Keiger said Bub's horse came into his yard all by his lonesome, and that's why he was looking around to see what had happened. I can't swallow that. That horse would have headed for the Lightning L if he was on his own."

Faraway shook his head again, perplexed and worried. "What can we do, Matt?"

"We can prod around, and see if they let something slip. Let me do the talk-

ing. We'll find out what's going on."

Both Keigers were home. Ford was fixing the pump, but gave it up when they rode in. His wife came outside.

"I see you're fetchin' the team back," Keiger remarked.

Matt pulled up, and got down. "I hope you weren't put out any."

"Glad to accomodate," Keiger answered. "How's the boy?"

"He's holding his own."

"Has he said what happened?"

"Not yet. I've just been wondering if mebbe you didn't want to speak up before he did." He stared hard at Keiger, then at Belle.

She moved in closer. If Matt had given her a jolt, she didn't show it. "We don't mix in other people's doings," she stated, coldly.

"I said last night I'd be glad to say what—" Keiger began, but his wife silenced him with a look.

"Are you the man who got the wagon last night?" Belle asked Matt.

Matt nodded. "You recollect I was here earlier, too." A faint grin showed on his face.

"I don't believe I do," she stated. "Maybe I wasn't to home."

"You were going to give me a job. Remember?"

"No, I don't. You must be mistaken." She said it evenly, without any special emphasis, as if there couldn't be the slightest doubt as to her veracity. She was a shrewd and cunning woman, and Matt didn't underrate her.

He turned to Faraway, and asked for Shane's trinket. "This," he said, holding it up, "was in your wagon when I rode off with it last night. It belongs to Shane Faraway. How do you reckon it got in there?"

HIS eyes flicked back and forth between the two. Keiger had a stunned look on his face, stunned and frightened, so frightened, in fact, it wouldn't have surprised Matt to see him drop dead on the spot. Belle Keiger didn't show a thing, except that one side of her face twitched slightly.

"We don't mix in other folks doings," she answered, stubbornly. "We got this place, and we want to keep it. We don't

want to be drove out—not by you Faraways or Sam Locobo. We mind our own affairs.”

“Shane was in that wagon,” Matt snapped.

He couldn't get her riled. She put a hand on the wagon wheel, and stood there thinking a moment. Then she said: “I expect you got the right to know. Yes, he was in the wagon. He came up here leading the stocking horse. He had a bullet hole in his shoulder. When he got to the corral he fell off his horse, and Ford got him into the buckboard. I said he ought to take him home to you. We didn't know what had happened. Ford got the team, but before he got hitched, Shane came to again. Ford tried to talk some sense into him, but he wouldn't listen. He got out of the buckboard, and climbed his horse, and rode off. I don't know where he went. That's how that stocking horse happened to land up here.”

It all sounded plain, reasonable, and straightforward. They certainly couldn't be blamed for trying to keep out of it. They probably knew from experience it didn't pay to mix in the affairs of powerful neighbors. The story rang true, and Faraway believed it. Matt let it stand the way she told it.

“There's only one thing wrong with it,” he remarked on the way home. “She said Shane was shot, but I took a sniff at Bub's gun, and it hadn't been fired. If Shane's hurt, somebody else did it.”

They kept to the creek trail for some distance, skirting Lightning L range. Faraway was thoughtful and quiet. Finally he said, “I wish you'd take work with me. Or were you heading some special place?”

“Nothing special, I reckon,” Matt admitted. “I had a notion I could get a line on a gent down this way, but the trail's gone colder than a blue norther.”

“I figured you wasn't a plain drifter.”

“No. As a matter of fact, it goes against the grain with me. I like to stay put. I like a roof over my head, and a meal on the table.”

“They're yours at the Box F.”

“This gent I was trailing,” Matt went on, as if the thing needed settling in his own mind as much as it needed explaining to Faraway, “was a snake I never set

eyes on. I wouldn't know him if I fell over him. He went by the name of Korning at one time—Ferd Korning, but I reckon he changes that as often as he does his shirt, so that won't help any. He hired a gun-hawk to bushwhack my neighbor up on Smokey River range, and it was fixed to look like I did it. I took after the gun-hawk, and shot him, but it turned out he was only the hired help. He gave me that name—Ferd Korning—before he cashed in, and I went down his backtrail. I got a line on something that took me this way, but it's all run out.”

“When you go lookin' for snakes a far piece, you've picked yourself a chore,” Faraway remarked.

“What's a man to do?” Matt said.

“A man's always got enough snakes in his own back yard. If he keeps them down he's doin' his share. But when they get away you want to figure they always settle in somebody else's back yard.”

“I've been comin' to that way of thinkin',” Matt admitted.

“But if you got a place of your own I don't expect you'd care to tie down to the Box F,” Faraway said, regretfully.

“No,” Matt said, “but I got my kid brother holding it down, and—I'd like to stay a while.” He was thinking of Linda Faraway, but he didn't have the nerve to mention it outright.

Faraway smiled a little. “You're more than welcome, I cin tell you that. As a matter of fact, I think Linda's settin' her cap for you.”

“I cin hardly believe that,” Matt said, grinning back so Faraway wouldn't think he considered it serious talk. “But I'd like to.”

THEY both went silent again. Faraway could say something like that without letting it mean much, but for Matt it was too serious to make words for. It was something that had grabbed at him the first time he saw her, and it wouldn't let him go. He knew it would never let him go. It was the reason he hadn't gone on to Comanche House the night before, and it was the reason he had to stay now.

His thoughts swung back to what Belle Keiger had said. If she hadn't put in that piece about Shane being shot, he might

have swallowed the rest of it. But suppose all of it was made up out of whole cloth. What then? What reason would she have? If Shane had been there after Bub Locobo was shot, where had he gone? Sam Locobo claimed he had switched horses at his line shack on Squaw Creek, but it sounded a little fishy, because Shane's horse had certainly looked fresh when Matt met them on the creek bank. There wasn't a sound reason for Shane switching mounts. Another idea struck him. Suppose Sam's puncher was a crook like Tid Manger, possibly, like Tid, in Belle Keiger's pay. In that case, they couldn't be sure Shane had been at the line shack at all. It could be a trick to prove he was on the run when he might not be at all. But why would anyone want to build up something like that. He couldn't see any sense in it.

Faraway pulled up suddenly, and Matt looked up. On the far side of the creek the ground sloped up evenly to the hilltop, dipping down again on the other side. Halfway up the slope, Matt saw Clara Locobo trying to rope a saddled horse that looked fagged, but evaded every move she made. She tried to run it down, but the animal kept out of reach. There was something frantic about the way she went after it. Then Sam Locobo came down the hill, yelling, and waving her away. Clara crowded the horse toward the creek, and made a motion for help. Matt didn't know what it was all about, but he jumped his horse across, and grabbed a rein. Sam fired his gun, and let out a roar of rage, but Matt got the animal across the creek, clear out of gun range, and Clara followed.

Sam stopped at the edge, and ordered her back, but she refused to go.

"That proves it," Sam stormed at her. "You're sidin' Shane Faraway against your own brother."

"I got a right to," she flung back. "I—I'm bespoken to him."

It struck Sam like a blow between the eyes. He winced visibly, and even Faraway looked surprised.

"You come back here," Sam bellowed, "and fetch that horse."

"I'm not coming back, not till you get some sense."

"I'll talk to you, Faraway," Sam

called out to him across narrow creek.

"What is all this, Clara?" Faraway asked.

"It's about Shane. That's Shane's saddle on that horse."

Faraway started, but it didn't take long to convince himself it was true. Then he rode around the horse and looked at the brand. It wore a Star with a quarter circle above it. Matt didn't recognize the brand, but Faraway seemed to know it.

"He's come a long ways," he muttered, and then rode down to the creek, motioning Matt along.

They faced each other across the creek.

"Where's Shane, Sam?" Faraway demanded, in a voice he couldn't hold steady.

Sam choked with wrath. "Don't try that on me," he snapped. "I don't bluff so easy. You got him. You ought to know."

"Till now we've been friends, Sam," Faraway stated. "This is a terrible thing. Don't make it any worse. I'm warning you."

Sam stamped with rage. "I'm not making it any worse. Turn him over to the law, that's all I want. You can't hide him forever."

"I'm not hiding him. You are."

"Oh, I am, am I?" Sam roared sardonically. "Well, what're you goin' to do about it?"

"I'm coming to get him—and I'll have my men with me."

"That suits me, if that's the way you want it," Sam stated, leaving off his bellying all at once, and starting away, "I'll meet you halfway with mine."

CHAPTER

4

The Black Devil

Matt led the stray horse home. It was near dark when they reached the ranchhouse. Faraway and Clara went inside, and Matt unsaddled the fagged animal, and turned it into the corral. Linda came out to see it.

"Where is the Quarter Circle Star?" Matt asked her.

"More than a hundred miles north. Shane and I have been there together several times."

"With a lot of hard riding he could make it back and forth, I reckon," Matt

remarked. But, again, what he had heard at Keiger's place stuck in his throat. A wounded man would kill himself trying it.

Linda stared bleakly at the saddle on the fence. "I don't see why he would go so far, and then come back."

"It would be a smart thing to do, if he was on the run. Nobody would figure to look for him here, except that this horse got away."

"I s'pose that's true."

Matt watched her for a moment, then asked bluntly: "Have you seen him?"

"Why, no," she answered promptly, and he could plainly see it was the truth. "Sam Locobo's got him."

"Sam says not."

"Naturally."

"What does Clara say about it?"

"She doesn't know. She noticed the stray horse around their place, and went after it. Sam followed her before she could catch it, and get it out of sight."

"From what they said at the creek, it sounded like she figured Sam had hold of Shane. But when your father talked to Sam, he denied it up and down. Sam thinks he's being hid out here."

"If he is, he hid out himself."

"Where is Clara now?"

"With Bub in Shane's room."

"Did you know she was engaged to Shane?"

Linda nodded. "Yes, I've known it all along, but I guess I'm the only one who did."

"It'll be tough on them if this ruckus with the Lightning L gets out of hand, and that's what it's coming to."

"There must be some way to stop it."

"Maybe it's just as tough for you and Bub?"

She smiled a little for the first time.

"No, not for me and Bub. We're just friends."

Matt let his breath go. "I told your dad I was staying a while. Do you mind?"

"Why, no."

"The reason is I can't drag myself off—because of you."

She put her hand on the fence, and scuffed at the weathered board with her fingernail. He had his back to the fence. She was facing it.

"I can't say what I want to either," he went on, when she kept silent. "I haven't

the words to tell you how I feel."

Suddenly her head went down, and tears came to her eyes. She touched his arm, but she didn't look up.

"The tears aren't for Shane," she told him, finally, in a soft, shamed voice. "They're for me, because I was afraid you wouldn't say even as much as you have before you went away." Then she looked up, and smiled through her tears, and lifted her face to his.

Matt took her in his arms. Then he drew back suddenly.

"There's somebody over there near the house," he whispered. "See him—over there by the trees?"

Linda looked just in time to see the prowler move toward the house. He crouched down as he moved past the windows, turned the corner, and followed the wall to the far side of the house.

"Shane," Linda breathed. "He's going around to his room. He'll get in through the window. He's done it before."

Matt took her hand, and they followed around to the far side. Linda pointed out the window. It stood open, and there was a light inside. The prowler had disappeared.

"He's climbed in," Linda whispered.

"No, there he is. He's coming at it from the other side."

"Shall I call?"

"No, wait. You might scare him off."

The light from the window made a wall between them. Matt saw the man's arm come up, and rest on the sill. He couldn't see anything behind it, but he saw the glint of steel as the hand came into the light. Inside, Clara suddenly let out a terrified scream, and Matt ran into the room.

He had carried Bub into the room himself, and knew where the bed was. The prowler had worked himself around so he could look straight in on it. It wasn't Shane. He knew it, but he didn't dare fire, just in case. Then a gun flamed, and a bullet snarled at him from the window. He fired back, and footsteps thudded away. Matt lost him for a second, then spotted him again, and took another shot. The man stumbled, but he didn't go down. He climbed a horse staked out at the far end of the grove and pounded away into the night.

CLARA'S horse still stood at the corral, saddled and ready to go, and Matt took it. He knew the man was hurt, but he had a head start and he wouldn't give much for his chances to locate him. The horse under him was big and fast, nerved up because he carried a strange rider, but he was manageable, and cut down some of the intervening distance. Quickly Matt realized the horse was circling back to the north. Taking a chance, Matt made a bee-line to cut him off.

This was getting to be familiar ground—the creek trail with its border of quakers and willows, the open rolling hills on both sides, and the bench land beyond. The horse was heading for the Triangle Dot. As well as Matt could see, the rider was slumped far down in his saddle, but he could still ride, and he was making time.

The animal finally swung away from the creek, and went up the slope, heading straight for the lights that showed at Keiger's place. Matt couldn't stop him. The horse was faster than his own, and he saw the reason why when he finally got a good look. The saddle was empty. Whoever had made a final attempt to kill Bub Locobo had stayed behind somewhere along the trail.

Matt pulled up. A man with a lantern grabbed the horse when it came into the yard. Matt leg-hitched his animal, and went in on foot, keeping out of sight behind the corral. The Keigers and three punchers stood around the winded animal. Four saddled ponies were tied up at the corral, and when the light hit them right, Matt saw they all wore a Lightning L brand. He crowded in closer and heard the talk. The horse he had followed was Tid Manger's, and they were worried about Tid. Matt found out Belle had sent him back to the Box F to finish off Bub Locobo before he could do any more harm to their plans. Manger's second chore had been to gun Matt Sorrow, because Belle thought she knew who he was, and what he was up to.

"He killed Faro, and he killed Faro's brother up there on Smokey River when I sent him up there to build up the same kind of a play we're making here," Belle told them. "I recollected who he was when Tid told me his name. He spoiled

that play, but he won't spoil this one."

"We'd best wait with this till we find out what happened to Tid," Ford put in.

Belle, however, wouldn't hear of it. "We got Locobo and Faraway snarling at each other like wildcats, and when we get through tonight they'll jump at each others' throats. Nothing'll stop 'em after that. They won't listen to sense, not from Sorrow, nor anybody else. They'll shoot it out, and when they're through there won't be enough of 'em left to hold their range, and we cin step in. That Faraway house is on patented land, but we got the cash to buy it, and the old lady'll sell it for a song when the range war is over. That's where I want to live." Belle rolled it off as if it were something she had rehearsed a hundred times, her voice harsh, her fingers working, the muscles in her cheeks jumping.

A thin flat grin spread across Matt's face. What Faraway had told him came back to his mind. A man didn't need to look far to find a snake, and if he tromped the one underfoot, he was just as apt as not to lay into the one he was looking for.

"We got to wait," Ford Keiger still insisted.

"Don't anger me now," Belle warned, and reached for a quirt that hung on one of the saddles, as if she meant to use it.

ONE of the punchers snickered, and then dried up fast when she lashed out at him, and cut him across the face.

"I ain't worked on this like I done to let it go now," she went on, putting the quirt aside as if, actually, nothing had happened. "We got 'em on the run, and we'll keep it that way. You did nice, Mitch, fetchin' that Quarter Circle Star horse so it'd look like the Faraway boy come back."

"It was a damn long piece up there and back, I cin tell you, in the time I had. I led my own horse, and rode the Quarter Circle Star. I hazed it over to the Lightning L till it smelled oat and then let him go. I watched and they had quite a ruckus by the creek about it. Sam claimed Faraway had Shane hid out, and Faraway suspicioned Sam did. I thought the shoot-in' would start right there."

"If Tid done half as well at the Box F as you at the Lightning L we wouldn't

have nothin' to worry about," Belle told him.

Mitch grinned with pleasure. "I got these four horses out of the pasture after dark and one of them's got a broken shoe so all the sign'll check right back to Lightning L when they start a-lookin'."

"Like I told you to," Belle reminded him.

"Oh, sure," Mitch admitted. "A man cin hardly git the drift till you explain it out, Belle. You build a thing up like you was doin' stitch-work, and nobody knows what the piece is goin' to be, till you give it the last twist. And hangin' Shane Faraway is sure the last twist. When they get a gander at him tomorrow hangin' from a cottonwood in Black Shadow Gulch all hell's a-goin' to explode, and nobody's a-goin' to stop it till she's all blowed up."

A twig, or sliver of stove wood, snapped under Matt's boot, and brought a silence. The puncher Belle had quirted made a circle of the yard, looking in the dark corners, then started around the corral, but he turned and went back before he got as far as the spot where Matt lay. As far as Matt was concerned this was as good a time as any to let hell explode, but it wouldn't show Sam Locobo and Ross Faraway they were dancing to a tune Belle Keiger was whistling, and that the music would cost them all they had.

Out in the dark his horse nickered and got an answer further off. The sound set him to worrying. He figured all Belle Keiger's gun-hawks were here within shooting distance, but he couldn't be sure. And Tid Manger might have pulled himself together again, and found another horse.

The talk started up again, but Belle broke it short. "We talked enough," she stated. "Fetch him down to Black Shadow Gulch. Ford and I will meet you there."

Without another word, they climbed their horses and Matt pulled out on all fours. He didn't know where Black Shadow Gulch was. He didn't know where Shane Faraway was. But he knew what was in the wind, and he had a lot of riding to do.

His horse hadn't moved, but there was another rider near it, and he flattened out

again. It put him a-foot as much as if the horse had run off. He couldn't risk a shot so near the Triangle Dot. He couldn't risk another ruckus with Tid Manger, because if he got the worst of it, Shane Faraway would hang from a cottonwood tree in Black Shadow Gulch before morning. Then the rider called his name, softly, so it wouldn't carry far, and he ran in, because it was Linda Faraway.

"Get your dad," he told her. "Make it fast. I got it all straight now. Tell him to meet me where we caught the stray horse this afternoon. He's got to hurry."

"I'll tell him. Where are you going?"

"After Sam Locobo," Matt told her. "Now hurry."

Matt said later he didn't spend any time arguing with Sam Locobo once he got inside the house, but used his gun, and threatened to blow him through the roof if he let out a peep. Sam claimed later he wanted to come, and let Matt throw his weight around all he wanted to. At any rate, they were waiting at Crazy Horse Creek when Faraway and Linda showed up.

"You can't go," Matt stated, when he saw her. "I didn't say for you to come. I said—"

"I won't get underfoot," she told him. "I promise."

"I talked with her all the way," Faraway said. "It's no use."

CHAPTER

5

Dancing on Thin Air

Sam scowled at all of them. Matt got them started for Black Shadow Gulch, with Sam leading the way, and did some talking after they were on the move. "Both of you have been dancing to Belle Keiger's tune," he told them. "She's got hold of Shane. She's had him all along, and tonight she's going to give him a tune to dance to—on thin air. All these trimmings, like the Quarter Circle Star horse showing up on this range and switching horses at the line shack on Squaw Creek are all her doings to make it look like Shane killed Bub, and, when tonight's over, like you, Sam, hung Shane. They figure they'll have the two of you at each other's throats for good after that's happened. I crawled up on a confab they

were having in the Triangle Dot yard, and heard it all, right from her. I don't know where they got him, but they're fetchin' him to Black Shadow Gulch, so that's where we're bound for."

"A damn' trick," Sam muttered. "Somethin' you cooked up. I'd turn him over to the law if I got my hands on him, wouldn't I? Anybody would know that."

"They're riding Lightning L horses, Sam," Matt went on. "One of them's got a broken shoe that'll pin it right on you, Sam, when somebody starts reading the sign."

"Lord," Sam breathed, "I don't believe it. What's she aimin' at anyway?"

"To set this valley on fire, and when it's burned over, when the Lightning L and the Box F are dust and ashes, and you and Faraway with it, she's goin' to move in and take the range."

"You been chewin' loco weed."

"Wait and see."

Sam didn't ask about Bub, but Linda, out of sheer compassion, offered the information that he was holding his own. No one said anything about the incident at the window. For the most part, they rode in silence, Sam in the lead, then Matt so he could keep Sam from jumping the traces if he had to, with Linda and her father bringing up the rear. Matt figured that what he had said was sinking in and starting to make sense in Sam's mind, but he wasn't sure. Sam didn't let go his scowl, but when they reached Black Shadow Gulch he pulled up.

"It's blacker'n hell's own back yard in there," he remarked, "but so far as I know there's only one cottonwood tree in the whole place that's of a size to take a hanging. You want me to take you to it, mister?"

"Lead the way."

It was rough going from then on. The horses clattered over loose rubble, and stumbled into chuckholes, and Sam finally found the tree, and pulled up. "From here on it's your party, mister," he stated. "And you better make it good."

The tree stood on the edge of a sharp drop-off. Matt dismounted and took a look around. He noticed a trail crawling down to the lower level, and Sam said it came up out of the gulch on the far side, and led to Squaw Creek. "The boys use

it when they go up to my line shack up there," he stated. "It's a short-cut."

Matt got the lay of the land settled in his mind, and led them off some distance from the tree. "We'll wait here," he said. "You better make yourselves comfortable. I don't know how long it'll be."

It was a long cold wait. Faraway paced nervously back and forth. Linda sat on a rock, huddled into vague, motionless blur. Matt was edgy, because he wasn't sure they were at the right place, but he finally heard the clatter of stone on stone, the soft creak of leather, the drone of voices.

It was the Keigers, Belle and Ford. They came to a halt under the tree, but the argument they were having didn't stop. Ford was nervous as a cat and still wanted to call the whole thing off. They must have been arguing all the way from the Triangle Dot, because Belle was completely out of patience with him.

"It's a pity you don't appreciate what I'm doing for you," she complained.

"You didn't say at the start what you were going to do. You didn't say you were going to hang this kid. It's just like Mitch said. You keep things to yourself so nobody knows what he's gettin' into. You're a devil, Belle, a plain, natural-born devil."

"And you're a natural-born greasy-sacker, a no-good fool."

"I'm telling you you'll get us both hung," Ford flared.

She made a contemptuous sound. "Now stop your talking."

"I'll say what I've got to say. I should've said it years ago."

"Stop your drivell. I'll whip you." The whip made a sudden slapping sound, and Ford let out a sharp yelp. "Now stop it. Don't be such a rabbit."

"That's another thing—that whip. You heard that puncher snicker, laughin' at me, at you and me."

"I whipped him, didn't I?"

"Why didn't you let me do it?"

THE sorry wrangle carried clearly to the four listeners, but it was too dark to see. What they heard shamed them all. Faraway squirmed and Sam made little explosive sounds under his breath. Matt stared grimly into the dark. He didn't need to watch Sam any longer. Now that

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the Keigers had showed up, he knew he wasn't on a wild goose chase.

Ford Keiger kept quiet for some time, but then his thin voice whined up again on the same sorry complaint. He didn't want to go through with it. She would get them both hung. She had to call it off. His words sweated out of him, fear-soaked, whining, disjointed. It was enough to drive any man crazy, much more a short-tempered woman like Belle. It built up to some kind of a crisis, and then Belle said suddenly, sharply, with a touch of fear in her own voice: "You got a gun, Ford."

"I got a gun," he answered.

"What for? I've told you. I don't want you to carry a gun."

"Well, I got it."

"You know you can't handle a gun."

"I cin all right."

"Dammit," Sam mumbled, "show her! Use it on her."

"Shut up," Matt snapped, nerves tight and screaming, because Keiger's voice suddenly made a different sound. It was building up to a show-down.

"I'm going to pull out, Belle," Ford spoke up again. "I'm going to pull out right now."

She didn't answer him, but the whip sounded again, a flat, slapping sound, as if it were cutting into bare skin. Then a gun roared, and Belle let out a high-pitched scream, and one of the horses spooked away.

"Creepin' Judas!" somebody yelled. "What's goin' on here?"

"Who is it?" Ford called out.

"Me—Mitch."

"You got the kid?"

"Yeah."

"Come on in."

"This is it," Matt whispered. "Hold the horses, Linda. Sam, you can do what you please, come along, or stay put."

"I'm comin'," Sam muttered.

"Okay. Watch it every step. We want to get in as close as we can."

Ford Keiger touched a match to some dry grass twisted in a knot, and held it up. Mitch and the two punchers with him rode into the light. They had Shane Faraway between them, tied hand and foot

(Please continue on page 92)

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NEW NYLON
MESH SHOE

(Continued from page 90)

to the extra Lightning L horse. Mitch stared down at the shape on the ground for some time.

"I'll be damned," he muttered finally.

"I shot her," Ford choked out in a swollen voice. "She whipped me."

"You finally got around to it, didn't you, Ford?" Mitch drawled.

"We ain't goin' through with this," Ford stated.

"Wait now," Mitch said. "This is okey, Ford. Hell, it's even better than it was. It leaves just the four of us."

"Let him go."

"Keep that fire goin', Ford," Mitch told him. "We need some light."

Then he turned on Shane. "Here we go, Buster."

He walked Shane's horse under the tree. There was a rope around Shane's neck and one of the punchers threw the loose end over the handiest branch. When it looked like Ford meant to put up another squawk, Mitch gave him a shove with his boot and sent him flying. "All for yore own good, Ford," he grinned.

Shane looked battered and bruised, but there was fury and fight in his eyes. He expected to hang, but his spirit didn't quail. Even though he might be a high-riding hellion, and troublesome to get grown up, Faraway had a right to feel proud of what he saw now. Even Sam must have seen it, and realized that a man with that kind of gumption would never shoot another in the back the way Bud had been shot. At any rate, he pushed ahead and took the lead.

THE fire had flared up. Keiger saw them first and before a shot was fired the sorry little runt, blind with fright, made a run and went over the lip of the chasm. A swirling scream curdled off his lips until his body crashed to the rocks below. Mitch fired a shot, even before he knew exactly what was going on, and Shane jumped his horse straight ahead, spooking it off into the dark where he would be out of the way.

Mitch's bullet spattered stone in Sam's face, and with an angry snarl he got off a shot that gave Mitch a hard jolt, but he stayed in his saddle and fired his gun in a

GUNSLICK FOR A DAY

wild drum-roll that knocked Sam to the ground. He never did get back into the fight, a fight that flared up to a wild ban-shee racket, ridden with echoes from all sides, with gun-flame lancing back and forth and lead snarling from rock to rock. A stray bullet struck Belle, rolling her over like a child in sleep. Matt jumped past her, crouching and weaving and put another bullet into Mitch's carcass. One puncher turned tail, and Faraway shot him out of his saddle before he got beyond the circle of light. Then Faraway got hurt and went to his knees. A second later, Mitch's horse spooked over him and smashed him down flat. Mitch was bel-lowing at the top of his voice. His horse reared and went over backward, but Mitch got out from under.

Matt laced into the other puncher with a shot that took the puncher square between the eyes. His horse went beserk and horse and rider followed Ford over the rocky ledge.

Then Mitch came up again, triggering his empty gun and Matt gave him a piece of lead that turned him to jelly, flung him to the ground, limp and lifeless.

Matt looked around. Faraway and Sam Locobo were moving, trying to push themselves up.

"The dirty, double-crossin' side-wind-er," Sam bellowed. "I pay him wages, and he shoots me down." He was refer-ring to Mitch.

"He won't collect," Matt remarked. "How are you doing?"

"He got me in the leg. It jerked me all to pieces for a spell. Dammit, you should 'a' let me take him."

"How about you, Faraway?"

"Not bad. If you set me on a horse I can get home."

Matt heard a sound in the dark and then Linda's voice, going up to a sudden shrill pitch, came at him. "Watch out, Matt—behind you."

Matt went down flat and Sam and Ross Faraway sprawled again. A gun flamed in the dark and lead whistled at them. Matt didn't know what he had left in his gun. Maybe nothing, and if that was it, everything he had fought for was running out of his hands. A close shot scuffed stone and dust in his face. He waited



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briefly for the dust to clear, for gun-flame to show again, then triggered his gun.

"It's Tid Manger," Linda called out. He—"She stopped as if something had suddenly grabbed her by the throat.

"Is he done for?" Matt called, shoving fresh cartridges into his gun.

She came into the light, the color drained out of her face at what she had seen. She still couldn't speak, but she gave him an abrupt nod.

Shane said he didn't know who bush-whacked him and Bub Locobo on Crazy Horse Creek. The first shot hit him in the shoulder and knocked him off his horse. But he heard the second shot and saw Bub go down. After that he didn't remember much for some time. He knew someone called Faro had been in on it. They loaded him into a buckboard and took him to the Triangle Dot place, which accounted for the medallion Matt had found in the wagon box. Later, Shane said, he was on his own palomino again, tied hand and foot, being led off somewhere in the dark.

All the pieces fell into place in Matt's mind. Belle Keiger hadn't recognized him when he came up there to fetch the buckboard, but when she learned Bub wasn't dead, she had sent Faro back to finish the job, just as she had sent Tid Manger on the same chore when Faro had failed.

Shane did all the talking and when he finally asked a question of his own and found out Bub Locobo could pull through, it gave him a lift that took the hard wrath out of his voice and sent tears down his face. Sam Locobo finally put a hand on his arm and told him he was glad to hear Shane was taking Clara off his hands, knowing, as he did, that the only reason they had kept it secret was because he would raise such an uproar. Then he and Ross Faraway rode the rest of the way together, making excuses for each other.

Matt finally got them all in the house and sent a puncher for Doc Barstow again. Then at last, Matt took Linda by the hand and led her to the place where they had stood and held each other close.

"I believe," he said, "this is where we were interrupted."

THE END

(Continued from page 8)

had a chance. Only those born to the purple had a chance and they didn't need that chance. Accident of birth had given them power and wealth.

His men, who had been loafing at the Mission San Gabriel, wanted to return to the Rockies. Jed Smith could do nothing but leave this land he liked. But, in going home, he did not follow the same route on which he had entered California.

He cut across the southern tip of the San Joaquin Valley and was the first white man in history to cross the giant Sierra Nevada mountains. He crossed directly south of what is now Yosemite Park.

Did he find gold?

Rumor still claims Jedediah Strong Smith was the first man to discover gold in California. Some historians today claim he returned to the Rockies with a poke of gold he had washed from California sands. Jed Smith had no comment.

Had he found gold in California, he never told anybody about it. Had he told about panning gold, possibly the California goldrush of 1849 would have occurred twenty-two years earlier.

Twenty-seven days after leaving Mission San Gabriel, Jedediah Smith and his company, far from intact, reached the Great Salt Lake. Crossing the mighty Sierras had taken hard toll. He had left California with seven horses and two mules. When he reached Salt Lake he had one horse and one mule.

"We et the others," he said.

But nothing could keep Jed Smith and his Bible and his long-gun out of California. The next year he was back.

This time he stepped clear of California lawmen. He was looking for a route into Oregon, and he found it. But he paid for it in Oregon Territory. Indians jumped his party and almost wiped it out. Again came the rumor Jed Smith had gone to California not so much to find a Northern Trail as to mine gold.

One thing seems certain: After returning from Oregon Territory, Jedediah Strong Smith was well-to-do. True, he had sold lots of furs—but had he made enough profit on furs to attain such wealth?

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Jed Smith never said. He was about thirty years old then, and he believed more than ever in his Bible, and he still had his rifle. He had been married to a few squaws, as trappers had done in those days when white women were not, and one squaw had accompanied him to California.

He was wealthy. He never had to work again.

The summer of 1831 Jedediah Strong Smith unloaded a packet at Independence, Missouri, and soon he had wagons strung out toward the sunset. They went into a wilderness so far penetrated by only a few trappers. There was no trail. Later, there would be a trail.

The Santa Fe trail.

A dry land. Dust rolled under lumbering, lurching wheels. The Cimarron was dry. They made one dry camp; another was ahead, unless water was found. Jed Smith was thirty-three. He was in the prime of life—straight in the saddle, hair long to cover the scar on his ear—the scar left by the grizzly.

"We gotta have water. Our teams will die."

Jedediah Smith said, "We'll find water."

He rode ahead, going across the sand. The hoofs of his gaunt horse kicked up sand, for they dragged from weariness and thirst. He came to a spot where he saw mesquite.

He got down and scooped into the sand, for water and mesquite were close friends. He was working there when the Comanches came out of the chamiso and surrounded him.

They took his body and carried it to a cliff. One Comanche carried Jed Smith's rifle. Another thumbed through his Bible. He wondered what the funny figures meant.

They threw the body of Jedediah Strong Smith into a ravine. They gave him no burial. His wagons never got through into Santa Fe. But Jed Smith, lying dead in that gully, did not care.

He had died fighting odds. He had died with his Bible and his rifle. All his life his Bible and his rifle had been his closest friends.

CURSE OF THE LOBO CUB

(Continued from page 27)

"I think so," Tony said.

"If you ever get down to Hell will you let me know?" Burr Ridkey said.

"Sure, Burr," Tony said. "I'll let you know."

"That's good, kid," Burr Ridkey said. "I'll always wonder about it."

There was no more movement in the haymow and Tony York stood there and the tears squeezed from his eyes and ran down both sides of his nose. This was his past. This was the darting through thickets at night, the never being able to call a man a friend for even your best friend would put a bullet in your back.

The lump in his throat was gone now and only the blinding pain in his side was real. He stood there, catching his breath, and he forced himself to walk erect. He went out of the barn and there in the hard packed yard Jim Martell and Hollis were waiting for him.

THE END

(Continued from page 72)

on the warpath. The stage never reached the next stop."

He said it calmly, but it gave me a shock. I tried to picture what had happened out there on the prairie. I knew what an Apache could do when he had his war paint on. I felt a little sick. For a long time I sat there without moving, my memories dying, even as she had died. But the hate and the bitter thoughts that had dogged me for over a year were gradually becoming as formless and vague as the hazy desert rim. Finally I rose.

"Over the hill," I said, and gestured, "is a little oasis. Not large, but there's enough water to get us to Sandy Flats."

Jim looked at me closely, the veil over his eyes lifting, a wan look of understanding hovering around the fringes of them.

"There is still the third man," he murmured, "I would like to find him, too."

I smiled as I helped him to his feet. It felt good on my face. "Maybe we can find him together," I said. "After all . . ." I stopped as Jim pressed his hand into mine. It wasn't necessary to finish. He understood. Together we hobbled toward the little oasis hidden in the desert haze.

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(Continued from page 70)

numbed fingers. Bailey darted an astonished glance over his shoulder and then allowed the red hot knife to clatter to the floor.

The big man with the star on his vest stepped forward and quickly relieved Bailey of the gun in his holster. Then he motioned with both guns. "All right, you two. Step back against that wall and keep grabbin' for the ceiling."

Snake Bailey eyed the lawman sullenly. Then his pale eyes moved to the girl. A shadow of bewilderment lay across his sallow features. "Something you said brought this nosy lawman back here. What was it?"

The big man with the star laughed. "Right you are, mister. It was several things she said! For instance, she called me Mr. Trent."

Bailey's eyes slitted. "What is your name then?"

"Trent."

Bailey frowned. "What the hell! If your name is Trent and she calls you Trent, what's so queer about her calling you that?"

"Nothin' much, if she was anybody except my own daughter."

Bailey and Calhoun stared. "Your daughter!" gasped the older man in a weak voice.

The lawman went on. "I don't recollect her callin' me Mr. Trent afore in her whole life. And then when she spoke about two strangers and of them ridin' away with Mark to my ranch, I knew something was wrong."

Bailey groaned. "This here is your ranch!" he exclaimed.

Sheriff Trent nodded. "That's right. Someday it'll belong to Kate and her husband, but it's still my property. Then, of course, there were the four places set at the table and the way Kate packed me off when she knew that I'd come all the way out from town to enjoy a home-cooked meal again."

"You mean you weren't even trailin' us?" Snake Bailey's eyes held a sickly glint.

The lawman shook his head. "Only thing I was trailin' was a decent home-cooked meal."

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RUSH COUPON NOW!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-336, Chippewa Falls, Wis.
I'm willing to be shown how I can Build a Fine Business selling Jackets, Raincoats, and EXCLUSIVE Feature Shoes. **RUSH** me your **FREE** Selling Outfit, including Tackle-Twill Jacket, Velvet-eez Air Cushion shoes, unique Zipper shoes, other fast-selling items. Send everything **FREE** and **POSTPAID**. My own shoe size is (.....)

Name _____
Address _____
City & State _____

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-336 Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin



Millions of bottles
are bought by men
who like that

*clear
clean
taste*

All the thousands of words we might use to tell you about PM's "clear, clean taste" couldn't begin to make the idea as clear as this charming sketch of the cub on his honey holiday! This p.m. try the "clear, clean taste" that attracts so many millions to PM.

PM
BLENDED WHISKEY



National Distillers Products Corporation, New York, N.Y. Blended Whiskey. 86 Proof. 67½% Grain Neutral Spirits.